MAY, 1954 35¢

Universe

SCIENCE FICTION

"SHOCK" STORY by E. C. Tubb

20,000-word Novelet Sensation

THE SURGEON'S KNIFE by Randall Garrett

Also: WILSON TUCKER, ISAAC ASIMOV, DEAN GRENNELL

Editorial

LOST IN THE VENUSIAN JUNGLES

Our cover this month is painted by Robert Gibson Jones, and we think it is a very pretty painting indeed, in addition to being very provocative. As usual, the painting was not painted around a story, and therefore there was no story. As usual we decided to write a story for the cover. As usual, we were late in getting started, and as usual, the manuscript turned out to be a reject. Yes, we reject our own stories!

But just look at the cover a minute. What does it suggest to you? Anything logical? Here's a beautiful woman, scarcely clad, carrying what seems to be a young lad clad in a space suit. Obviously he's been in some trouble and now she's lugging him out of the swamp. Since he actually is a young lad, we can't have a romance—the lady is just too mature for him. And she hardly looks like she'd be his mother.

What then? Now do you begin to see why the editor's story was a reject? Sometimes when we get stuck on a cover like this we make a contest out of it. But then we get snowed under with entries, and all the ideas are the same—it's an ordinary sized Earthman (even if he looks youthful) being rescued by the Princess of Venus (who is 8 feet tall) and they will live happily ever after; or, it's his mother. What else?

So there you have it. We're running a Jones cover because it's pretty. We hope you folks who like exotic Venusian jungles will like this one; we hope you folks (male) who like exotic Venusian princesses will like this one; and we hope you readers who think editors can solve all problems are not too disillusioned . . . because this one had us stuck.

We admit it—we're licked. But there's the cover—do with it what you like. You can even frame it!

Or you can go to the SFCon and buy the darn thing!

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UNIVERSE SCIENCE FICTION

Issue 5

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Over one thousand years ago Earth deserted her colonies, leaving them to fend for themselves on hostile planets. Some perished, but others held on and grimly fought their way back to civilization, carrying bitter memories of the mother-planet. Prepared at last, they were determined to seek out the almost legendary Earth and take revenge.

SURGEON'S KNIFE

By Randall Garrett

Illustrated by Lawrence

A sane society, when in conflict with a less fortunate society, will resolve the conflict in a manner which will not only insure its own safety, but will increase the sanity level of its opponent.

—Axioms of Humanity

PROLOGUE

"YOUR nerve in coming here," said the Minister of Broklan, "is exceeded only by the nerve of your planet in sending you."

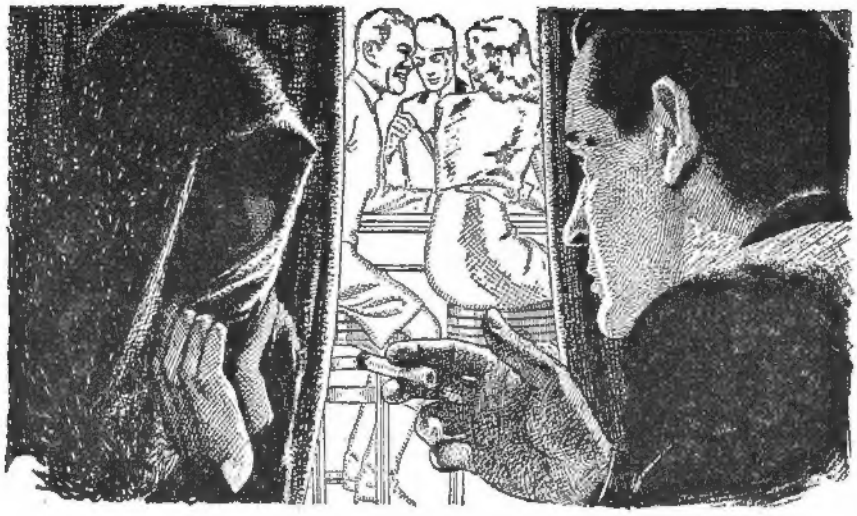
"Quite possibly," said the Earthman.

The Minister kept his voice icily diplomatic. "Perhaps you think that because Broklan and the other planets of the Federation were once colonies of Earth, we owe some sort of gratitude to the mother world?

"I assure you, we do not. Earth deserted us when we most needed her. We have not forgotten that."

"That was over a thousand years ago," the Earthman reminded mildly. "Surely you can have no malice toward Earth now."

"A thousand years ago," the Minister said coldly, "Earth left her colonies to fend for themselves on planets that were hostile to Man. There was no aid, no weapons, no supplies. Men died horribly fighting alien environments on supposedly Earthlike planets. On most planets, they reverted to savagery



and barbarism; on some, they died out completely. Even here on Broklan, we were just barely able to save a little of the technological heritage of our ancestors; we just barely managed to keep history as history and not as legends.

"Because of that, we found ourselves far ahead of the rest of the colonies; we found that we were in a position to weld those colonies together into the largest nation in the Galaxy.

"Civilization must progress, my friend, not fall back on itself as Earth's civilization has done."

"True," the Earthman agreed. "Civilization must progress. But is hate a sign of progress?"

The Minister smiled. "You misunderstand. We do not hate you, we pity you. So much knowledge was lost during the Colonial Interregnum that we do not, even today, know where Earth is in the Galaxy. But we long ago resolved to find it someday in order to learn from what we believed to be a ruined and decadent planet.

"Now we know that you are not ruined—only decadent. But we intend to make Earth a member of the Federation of Broklan as soon as we find her."

"*If* you find her," the Earthman said succinctly.

The Minister clasped his hands together and looked directly into the Earthman's eyes. "Let us not play games together, sir. One of

our exploratory vessels disappears without a word. Four years later, an Earthman, representing a planet which is legendary even on Broklan, comes directly to the major planet of the Federation. We don't know where Earth is, but you know where Broklan is, and you know our language. The conclusion is obvious."

"Very," said the Earthman.

"Then you don't deny that you have captured a Broklanian exploratory vessel?"

"Would it do any good to deny it?"

"None. You are quite right. And the knowledge that you do hold the ship as hostage is the only thing that keeps us from taking the knowledge of the whereabouts of Earth from you in our—ah—psychological chambers."

"A pleasant euphemism," the Earthman commented.

"Quite pleasant. Now, unless you wish to discuss the annexation of Earth to the Federation of Broklan for the further progress of civilization, I have nothing more to say to you."

The Earthman rose. "In that case, Minister, I see no reason to waste either your time or mine. Good day."

"Good day. Your ship will not be molested; you are free to go. But bear in mind that Broklan will win eventually. We have found you once; we will find you again. We have, you must remember, forty-seven planets behind us; a total of over thirty billion people. How many planets are now under Earth's domination?"

"One," admitted the Earthman truthfully.

"Precisely. When we find you, we will take control. And if we can not do that, we will remove you from the Galaxy in the same way that a surgeon's knife removes a cancer. You can not hope to win."

"Possibly," said the Earthman cryptically.

* * *

I

Smisson looked out the window at the ancient city feeling as though someone had kicked him in the head.

From his vantage point on the twelfth floor of the Technology Building, he could see the clustered buildings of the Broklanian Advisory, and, beyond the Advisory walls, the city of Nayaproosh. And beyond the city lay the sea.

Smisson tried hard not to think. He just wanted to let his brain settle a little, and he felt that looking at the stone and mud buildings huddled gloomily under the drifting clouds of Genedek would give him something to do while he waited

for his mind to clear itself.

If he glanced to his right, he could see the spaceport twelve miles away, a great, flat area chiseled out of the island's rock, just barely visible through the faint mist. But the last thing he wanted to look at was the spaceport.

He let his eyes wander over the massive, squat, stone architecture of the wealthy Genedeker's castles and the baked clay brick homes of the lesser classes. Finally, his eyes came to rest on one castle a little taller and more formidable than the rest, the home of the Burkmiser of the Burk of Nayaproosh.

Then, suddenly, he slammed his fist against the hard, tough plastic of the window in a gesture of frustration, anger, and fear. And, almost before he could feel the slight pain of the impact, the protective blocks in his mind slammed down tight.

Smisson regarded his fist thoughtfully. "If anyone were watching me," he said aloud, "They'd think I'd gone off the deep end."

"If you talk to yourself, they probably will."

Smisson jerked around to face the voice. "Gorse!"

Gorse nodded and eased his porcine body into a chair. "I didn't mean to interrupt you, but your door was unlocked, so I came in."

"I—" Smisson began.

Gorse patted the air with a thick-fingered hand. "Don't try to explain your behavior. I don't think you're going off the deep end, but if you were, I wouldn't blame you. My nerves are getting pretty sticky, too."

Smisson sat down and waited for his superior to go on.

Gorse inspected his fingernails. "De Burkmiser has been in to see me again."

"Any luck?"

Gorse shook his heavy head vigorously, making his sagging jowls wobble. "None. He insists that the ship landed on Genedekish soil, and therefore is the property of the planet Genedek, or, more specifically, the Burk of Nayaproosh."

Smisson leaned forward and massaged his forehead. "And there's nothing we can do about it. Not one damned thing."

Gorse ran his fingers over the top of the little desk plaque that said: TECHNICAL ADVISOR GAR SMISSON. "I tried to get something out of the Burkmiser; I knew we had to get something, somehow, to start on—to get a toehold, so to speak." He placed his fingertips together and gazed solemnly at them. "What I did was imply that I didn't believe

him."

Smisson lifted his head and raised an eyebrow. "You called him a liar?"

"Nooo . . . At least, not directly. I suggested that he was very clever. My argument went along these lines:

"Broklan has the only interstellar drive known. Ever since the planet Genedek became a free state twelve years ago, there has been increasing pressure from the Froygesheft to give the drive to Genedek. Even our own Tekniges-heft has been roped in on the deal.

"Now, four days ago, the yearly transport from Broklan left after the usual twenty-four hour stay. It will not return until next year, and, until it does, we will have no further connections with Broklan.

"Late that same evening, it seems, a meteor falls to the south. Or at least, a meteor-like trail is seen. Those are facts..

"But why does this vessel arrive at such an opportune time? Granted, we have seen a large spherical object that is supposed to be a ship, but it doesn't *look* like a ship.

"Therefore," Gorse spread his hands, "we would like some proof, Ur Burkmiser, that this object really is an interstellar vessel before we do business."

"How did he take it?" Smisson asked.

Gorse shrugged massively. "He said he would think it over and give us his decision later."

"Do you," Smisson asked, "really believe that theory?" His head ached, and he didn't feel like talking, but he had to keep his mind off of—

The blocks slammed down again.

Gorse was saying: "I don't know. I wish I did—believe it, I mean. There actually may be an interstellar vessel somewhere in the Genedekish system, unlikely as it may seem.

"But we have to know more about it. The trouble is that it's such a touchy political situation."

It was all of that, Smisson thought. After sixty years of Broklanian domination, the Genedekers finally thought they had a club to hold over the head of the Advisory.

There would be no more contact with Broklan for a full year—minus four days: That dumped the whole problem right in the lap of Chief Advisor Gorse.

Smisson rubbed his temples. "The trouble isn't just in the politics: if there's an interstellar vessel out there somewhere, we're faced with more than just a little squabble with Genedek and the Freedom Society. Why doesn't the Froygesheft wake up? Can't they see the danger?"

Gorse stood up, slowly rubbing

his palms together. "That's why I can't quite bring myself to believe the Froygesheft's story; they don't act if they believe it themselves. But we've got to find out.

"The only influence we have is through the Technical Society. We influenced it once; we organized it. It's our job to get them to pull a few strings with the Froygesheft. I'd like to have you talk to Ur Mulla at the earliest opportunity. As head of the Teknigesheft, he wields quite a bit of influence.

"I think you can bring him around better than I can, because those boys are trained to have a hell of a lot of respect for a scientific education. What I want you to do is to get an opportunity to inspect this vessel. Alone, if necessary. Okay?"

"Fine," said Smisson without enthusiasm. "As a matter of fact, he's coming up for tea this afternoon. I'll see what I can do."

"Excellent. Good luck. I'll let you know if anything further develops." Gorse walked heavily to the door. There he stopped and turned. "And don't let this get on your nerves so much. We've got to keep our minds clear." Then he closed the door behind him.

Smisson looked at the door without seeing it for several minutes. Finally, he got up, walked over to it, and locked it. Then he went over to the full length mirror in the wall and looked at himself.

It was the same face he had always known. Round, but not too chubby. Straight, smooth, brown hair. Small brown mustache. Gray eyes. All as they had always been.

The face of Gar Smisson, all right.

"But let's face it," Smisson said aloud, "I'm *not* Gar Smisson. Then who the hell am I?"

II

The Teknigesheft had been organized for the sole purpose of keeping the Federation planet Genedek from getting too smart—*double entendre* intended.

It was a standard operating procedure on every planet. In order to build factories which can manufacture goods and trade with Broklan, it became necessary to teach the natives of the other planets some science — but not too much.

Every student who applied for enrollment in the Broklanian Technological School had to pass rigorous mental and emotional examinations by the Psychological Board. Their purpose was to weed out the ambitious and the imaginative. Broklan wanted trained technicians, but it did not want research scientists.

The primary objective was to build factories which could turn out spacecraft. Not until a large fleet was in operation could actual trade with the other planets begin. Spacecraft were hellishly expensive; twenty-five had been built on Broklan in the past hundred years, and of these, one had crashed, two had exploded due to faulty engines, and one had been captured by the legendary planet Earth.

More were needed, and for this purpose the various planets of the so-called Federation had to build up a technology that could handle the construction of interstellar spaceships. And to that end, the technical societies were created.

Given a group of people who have a workable knowledge of the "mysteries of the universe" or "magic" or "science" or whatever you want to call it, and tell that group that they must keep their knowledge secret in order to keep themselves above the normal run of society, and you will have a method of controlling the technological advancement of the society to which that group is attached.

At least you do in theory, but Smisson was not so sure of the Genedeker Teknigesheft.

Ur Enrik Mulla was one of the first graduates of the school, and had been the president of the Teknigesheft for more than twenty years. He sat across the desk from Smisson and stroked his flowing white mustache gently.

"I am pleased to accept your invitation, Ur Smisson," he said quietly and with only the slightest trace of an accent.

Smisson smiled and poured two cups of spice tea from the brewer on his desk. "The pleasure is all mine, Ur Mulla." He handed one of the cups to Mulla and sat down. "Our health," he said after the first sip.

"Our health," echoed Mulla.

The formalities were over.

Smisson took another sip of the spice tea, then set the cup down. "Enrik, I want you to do me a favor."

The old man smiled. "I knew there was more to this than a cup of tea, Gar. What is the favor?"

"I'll be blunt, my friend. I want to get a look at that spaceship—if it *is* a spaceship."

"No doubt you do," said the old technician. "But I am not in a position to give you permission to see it."

"I know that, but you could do a little wirepulling for me."

"I'm afraid you overestimate my importance, Gar. Remember, the Teknigesheft is not—ah—altogether in absolute favor with the Froygesheft. They look upon us as tools of Broklan."

"They do?" Smisson tried to look mildly surprised.

Mulla gestured meaninglessly with one hand. "You and I know that such talk is foolishness, but the Ur Burkmiser, for one, views the Society with a—shall we say, an uneasy eye."

Smisson moved his teacup in little circles and watched the dark, spicy liquid swirl smoothly around the container. "Enrik, let me get something straight. The Burkmiser is negotiating with us now to give the Teknigesheft certain data concerning processes which are—uh—actually beyond the present development of Genedek. He wants interstellar travel for a people who believed that Genedek was a few islands floating on an infinite sea until sixty years ago. He's trying to push Genedek ahead too fast. But let that pass.

"He says that if we do not give the Technical Society these secrets, he will be forced to use the science of the alien interstellar ship against us. But he is willing to trade information. He has the ship; we have Broklanian technology. Trade about is fair play.

"That's essentially what he wants, isn't it?"

Enrik Mulla nodded. "I think so, yes. Why?"

Smisson narrowed his eyes. "Who is going to analyze the instruments and engines on board that ship?"

"We of the Society, of course."

"Has he let you board the craft yet?"

"Yes."

"And yet you say he doesn't trust you?"

Mulla frowned. He felt as though he had been caught in a lie, and yet he knew that he had stated the facts truly. "I meant that he does not trust us enough to—to permit *you* to see the ship. I could not vouch for you, you see."

"Well, then, can you tell me anything about it?"

"I'm afraid not. I've only looked inside it. There's not much to tell."

Smisson decided to try another tack. "As I understand it, the being who piloted the craft is dead. Have you seen the body?"

"Yes," the old man winced. "An ugly-looking brute."

"Humanoid?"

"Yes, but not human. Definitely not human."

Smisson tapped a finger on the desk. "Don't you see what this means? Some alien culture has found Genedek! The danger we both face from them is far greater than any petty squabbles you may have with Broklan! We've *got* to have that ship!"

Ur Mulla spread his hands eloquently. "Your Chief Advisor, Ur

Gorse, said the same thing to the Burkmiser; I think His Excellency's answer is the best I can give.

"If there is another alien race which has designs on Genedek, we must fight it together. This means we must have full access to Broklanian technology in order to do our part.

"The Advisory staff, by itself, couldn't possibly hold off an invasion force, even with energy weapons. The Army of Genedek couldn't hold them off armed only with solid projectile weapons. So, for the protection of all of us, we must pool our resources."

Smisson folded his hands to keep from clenching his fists.

"Look. We can't possibly give you anything in time to help. We have been giving the Teknigesheft as much of our knowledge as it is possible to absorb in any given length of time. What good will it do you to know how to make an energy weapon if you don't have the equipment to make one yet?"

Mulla frowned as though he didn't understand the point.

"Take that tungsten alloy we're using as an example of heat dispersion graphing in the Senior Metallurgy classes," Smisson continued. "Do you think that alloy could be made on Genedek? I'll tell you right now it couldn't. It takes specialized equipment to make, which takes, in turn, other specialized equipment. Before you could make a fistfull of the stuff, you'd have to build for five years to make the tools.

"And what good would the alloy do you, once you had it? It has absolutely no use except as a liner for high-temperature reaction chambers, such as a rocket tube.

"So *we* will have to use those alien gadgets! They may be even beyond us, but we'll have a better chance than you will!

"Enrik, for the sake of Genedek, if not for the sake of the Federation, you *have* to talk the Burkmiser into letting us analyze that ship!

"Can't you do that for me as a friend?"

The old man stood up. "I'm afraid not, Ur Smisson." He seemed a little confused and uncertain as to what he should say next. "I enjoyed the tea, Ur Smisson," he finally said. "But I have some other appointments."

There was nothing Smisson could say. The President of the Teknigesheft excused himself and left quietly. Smisson looked at the door that had closed after him.

"Well," he said, "that was about the most uninformative conversation on record. Did you get all of it?"

"Every bit," Gorse's voice came

over the intercom. "I don't know exactly what's going on, but I damned well don't like it!"

"Me also. Anything else?"

A sigh came over the speaker. "No. I'll see what can be done with the Burkmiser. Thanks." There was a soft click as Gorse shut off the communicator from his end.

The thing that had been niggling at the base of Smisson's brain all afternoon came out and faced him.

Smisson closed his eyes and looked at it for a long while before he made up his mind. It didn't make sense, but he knew he'd have to do it eventually. So—

In an unsavory neighborhood like that, he'd have to be careful. There were men there who openly didn't care for Broklanians. He opened his desk drawer and took out the snug little holster with its tiny, but deadly Lindurst Fifty.

He strapped it on and fitted it into the hip pocket of his short trousers. His cloak would cover it easily, and still it would be instantly available for emergencies.

As he walked out the office door, the thought came: *Why? Who's waiting for me? Who*—?

But the protective blocks in his mind shut off the thought before it could get any further.

Ormsly was in the outer office. "Haven't you left, yet?" Smisson grinned.

"Nope. Alavar and I are staying a little late to feed the rest of this Project Search data into the computer."

Smisson frowned as he looked at the subadvisor. "Project Search?"

"Sure. You remember. The orders came through on the last ship. You signed the work slips."

Smisson shook his head. "I don't remember reading it. I'll have to watch what I sign more closely. What is it?"

"Here, I've got a copy of it somewhere." Ormsly fumbled through his desk drawer. "With all this excitement over the alien spaceship the Genedekers are supposed to have, I suppose it slipped your mind. Here it is." He handed an envelope to Smisson, who pulled out the sheaf of papers and began to read.

III

" . . . to be known as Project Search. The details of the project are for personnel above the position of Deputy Subadvisor only.

4. The purpose of the project is to uncover whatever clues may exist in the legends of the various planets which will point to the location of the planet Earth.

5. The project will be carried out by . . . "

Earth. A thousand years before, she had deserted her colonies on planets that were supposedly Earthlike. But there was only one planet that was truly Earthlike.

Earth.

"No supplies," the Expedition Leader said. "What do they expect us to do? Live off the land?"

The Junior Exec frowned. "Those farmers won't stand for it. They'll blame us. They'll lose their crops if they don't get the dope to fight off those bugs. We'll all starve for that matter."

"Sure," the leader nodded. "But what can we do? Radio? Earth will get the word in something like twenty thousand years."

"Careful, son. You'll have to learn to handle the gun properly. We don't have many charges left." Mayor Brown took the weapon and lifted it to his shoulder. "You hold it—"

"Dad?"

"Yes, son?" Brown lowered the rifle again.

"We need charges to fight the griffins. What happens when we run out?"

The Mayor's eyes narrowed. "I don't know what will happen, son. The griffins breed faster than we can kill them. Earth shut off our supplies ten years ago. We can't make things like this gun or the charges without big factories. We —"

"Dad, why didn't they send us any supplies?"

The Mayor's eyes blazed. "I don't know, son. But I wish I could get my hands on the throat of the man who ordered the cutoff!"

Badna sat on the stockade wall, listening to the beasts outside. His stomach felt like it was on fire, but there was nothing he could do about it. He heard a noise beside him and turned swiftly.

"Shila! What you doin' here?"

"Brang some soup."

In spite of his hunger, Badna eyed the soup and sniffed it suspiciously. "Ain't no native stuff in it, is they?"

"None atall. Ain't very much, but—"

Badna sipped the soup cautiously. It tasted all right; pretty good, in fact. He'd been suspicious because Shila was one of the few who could eat the native plants and live. There were some of the immunes who wanted everybody to try it; they had an idea that if everybody tried it, they would survive through the hunger.

But Badna knew better. His

grandpap had been able to read; his grandpap had told him what the books said about the native plants. Poison. Deadly poison..

Maybe a few people could live off it, but they couldn't all settle down to eating it. They had to have the Good Food. The Home Plants. Even the native animals weren't fit to eat. The Hawgs and the Sheeps had all died off when Badna was a little kid because the Old Plants were being eaten by the Wormies.

And now there wasn't even enough left for the people.

Badna said: "I wish we had something to eat instead of this weak old soup. What're we gonna do, Shila?"

Shila looked at him. "We gonna eat the native food, that's what. Ain't gonna kill all of us. Most of us live."

"Not me, honey," Badna shook his head. "I ain't gonna eat the native food. It—" He choked suddenly. "I—" A sudden, grasping pain caught him in the stomach; a pain he couldn't stop. . . .

"Honey!" Shila screamed. "Honey! Don' die on me! I thought you'd be awright! Honey!"

Badna died in convulsions before she could get help.

Agru flexed his muscles and stood before the mob defiantly.

"We go from this accursed place!" he shouted defiantly.

Ilihoo, the old medicine man stood up, defying Agru.

"O Fool!" he screamed, "we must live here in the place of our grandfathers! Only here will come the Ships from Almighty Earth! The demon, Dazeez, will be—"

Shouts drowned him out. "Shut up, old man!" "Lies!" "False prophet!" "Fool!"

Agru felt himself master of the situation. He raised his hand and bellowed loudly: "People of my father! It is said in the words of our thrice-great grandfathers that there will be no ships from Earth! The Gods have forgotten us! They have forgotten us for many generations! It was repeated by the Elders before they died that Earth had sentenced us to die! Are we to believe that we can not trust the Words of the Elders?"

He saw that he had the attention of the people; even Old Ilihoo was watching them.

He took another deep breath and plunged on. "It has been spoken, time and again, that upon the world the demon Dazeez shall come many times. And he has come! He has come many times, and each time worse!

"Is it not spoken that the Evil Earth had Dazeez? And is it not spoken that only at this place, the Landing Port, can we be found by Earth?

"Then is it not foolish to stay?"

Agru saw he had them now. They were beginning to see the logic in his words. They had but to look about them at the rotting blue corpses of their friends and loved ones to see that he spoke true. The demon had killed seventeen out of each score.

Suddenly, old Ilihoo coughed very slightly. That was the first sign, and Agru took advantage of it. He lifted his voice and said:

"If Ilihoo's belief is right; if Earth is a god who is testing our faith, then I call upon Earth to strike me down!

"But if I, Agru, am right; if the evil that has reduced our number from ten tens of tens to a band of three tens in six generations is the evil of Earth, and if the good is the Good, then let Ilihoo be stricken." Agru knew what would happen and it did, quickly.

When Ilihoo began to cough in earnest, the crowd tore him to pieces. Agru was king.

Makhil the Great sat upon the High Throne and pronounced sentence.

"Inim, you have defied the laws of the Tribe. You must die with your father. May the Tribe feast well."

Inim screamed. "I did but try to help my honored father!"

Makhil the Great shook his head. "You know the law. All who reach the age of thirty-five shall die for the good of the tribe. Had you obeyed the law, you would have lived another nineteen years. And yet, you disobeyed."

"But my father is wise!" screamed Inim. "He—"

Makhil silenced him with a wave of his hand and turned to the condemned Grothnik, father of Inim.

"What say you, Old One?"

Grothnik squared his shoulders. "Man needs meat to live. Only Man can supply meat. After a man has borne his sons, he has no right to live. My son is a fool. Let us both be eaten. May the Tribe feast well."

Makhil nodded. "So be it. Prepare them. Now.

On every planet, men had died horribly. On some, humanity had been wiped out completely. But on most the race, driven by the terrible human will to survive, had lived.

And with them had lived a terrible and undying hatred for Earth.

IV

Smisson handed the papers back to Alavar.

"I see. Cross-filtering. Spot where all the legends and warped histories mesh with each other and see if we can get anything from that. It might work."

He stood up from the desk where he had been sitting. "I've got an appointment. See you in the morning."

Less than three minutes later, he was walking out into the Genedekish night.

The first thing that hit him when he walked out of the air-conditioned Tech building was the oppressive humidity. Each breath he took seemed to splash against the back of his throat, and the air washed wetly over his skin, leaving behind it a sticky film of perspiration and dew.

Overhead, Ine, the nearer of the two moons shone like a great patch of golden gauze through the ragged clouds. It would soon be high tide.

He did have an appointment; of that much, he was sure. An appointment of long standing. But when had he made the agreement to meet someone? And whom was he supposed to meet?

The questions ran around in his mind like small rodents sniffing for game—looking for something. Looking for an answer. The answer was there, but it was too well hidden, too deeply buried to find.

He climbed into his car, started the motor, and pulled the car out of the parking lot.

Gar Smisson. Who was Gar Smisson? Had such a man actually ever existed?

He tried to remember his childhood, his life on Broklan.

Mother's name: Lusa. Father's name: Semal. Place of birth: Grympernt City. Date of birth: 4/7/722. Brothers and sisters: None.

All the answers came out neatly, as though they had been read to him out of a book. But they contained no feeling of reality for him. A thousand times before he had answered those questions, and he had never thought about the answers as he gave them.

But he couldn't actually remember the real events behind the word-data that was stored in his mind. What did his father look like? The answer came immediately. Brown hair, gray eyes, small beard. But it was a verbal description. He could not picture his father as a person; he could only dig up pat verbal phrases about him.

The guard at the Advisory gate

held up his hand, and Smisson slowed automatically. He showed his identity card to the Security officer, and drove on, out into the streets of Nayaproosh. The beams of his headlights cut a swath of white through the faint sea-mist which hung over the sprawling city like a pale yellow wash from the golden light of Ine.

The first and most obvious question was: Am I insane?

No, he knew it wasn't that. He could not be quite sure of how he knew, but deep down inside his brain was a strong and comforting assurance that there was nothing wrong with his mind.

Very well, then, he must work with the data he had.

His childhood memories were all on the verbal level. He could not remember any of the incidents as they took place, only as they could be described. They were not at all like his memories of, say, ten days ago.

let's see—what happened then? oh, yes—i was at that party in the evening—i can see it plainly—gorse a little drunk—ur goslik in the corner all evening nursing that foot of his—

The memories were perfectly clear; he had a definite feeling of having experienced them. How far back in time did that feeling persist?

do i remember broklan? yes—i remember the ship—i recall the day i got my commission papers—all those psycho tests gave me—tough—school? yes, school—the time we pushed that young-looking professor (what was his name? hur? yes. dr. hur, that's it) in the fishpond because we thought he was a beginning student—and before that—the first day of registration—i came from grympernt city and—

And there, quite abruptly, it ended.

Seven years ago, he had boarded a train to go to college. He had majored in Engineering Co-ordination with an eye toward getting a Technical Advisor's position, and, because of his personality and high scholastic standing, he had managed to be accepted for the psycho tests a full year before he expected to be.

"Stable and well-balanced," the results had said.

Then why was his memory a totally dead thing before he came to college?

There was only one answer. The lifeless memories were phony. All verbal, and all lies. The real memories of who he was and what happened to him before the age of twenty were gone—or buried.

Smisson applied the brake smoothly and turned into one of the all-night parking lots. There weren't very many people in Nayaproosh who could afford a car, but to leave one of the streets after dark was to invite robbery, so the parking lots did a thriving business and charged like the very devil.

They had a right to. This particular one kept six armed men on the payroll to guard the lot at night.

Smisson parked the car himself, signed the book, and walked out into the black gloom of the streets, where the only illumination was the dim glow from the moon.

He drew his cloak around him more closely and walked slowly toward the Grand Canal, his eyes open for danger and his hand poised near his holster. There were Genedekers who did not like Broklanians and there were Genedekers who made their living by mugging. Either one was dangerous to Smisson.

He had several blocks to go from the parking lot, and he didn't care to have a club or a knife applied to him before he got there.

V

Genedek is a planet of water. There are no continents which raise themselves high above sea-level, nor are there any great deeps in the ocean; the crust of Genedek is relatively free from such wrinkles. The seas are shallow, and the islands are many.

There are two great island chains upon which the majority of the human inhabitants of Genedek live; the Equatorial Islands and the Mountain Islands. In the former group is located the largest single island on the planet, Nayaproosh, on which the city of Nayaproosh is located.

The great tides that are pulled around the planet each day by Ine, the nearer and lesser moon, and Swy, the further and greater, had been used for power for hundreds of years, as had the winds which sweep almost unhindered across the face of Genedek.

Since the coming of the Broklanians, the locks of the Grand Canal had been strengthened and tightened to hold the water which powered the new electric generators of the Nayaproosh Power Company. There are no coal beds and no petroleum deposits on Genedek; the sea has seen to that.

Smisson could smell the canal plainly from where he was, less than a quarter of a mile away. There was the tang of salt in the air, a tang subtly pervaded by the odor

of dead sea creatures.

Even this late in the evening, the air was hot, heavy, and wet; not until past midnight would it begin to cool to a point that a Broklanian would call comfortable.

Smisson was letting all these things run through his mind without actually giving them a great deal of thought. They were simply something idle to think about—

He stopped suddenly—

Footsteps.

His own boots had heavy, resilent sponge-plastic soles which made practically no noise on the cobbled streets. Only a Genedeker would be heard that easily.

He listened carefully, trying to place the steps. They were ahead of him, not behind. Evidently, the person had come out of one of the side streets ahead of him. The steps were retreating, moving down the street in the same direction that Smisson wanted to go.

He walked on, grinning at the thought that he was following someone instead of having someone follow him.

He had an eerie feeling of being alone in the city, with only ghostly footsteps as companions. The moonlight was deceptive in its lighting: it seemed fairly bright, but anything more than a few yards away was as invisible in the moonlit mist as if there were no light at all.

Smisson didn't mind walking; it was the delay involved that he hated. He could have driven all the way to his destination, but if he parked anywhere except in a guarded lot, he would run a terrific chance of having to walk all the way back to the Advisory. Far behind him, he could hear another set of footsteps clicking, their faint echoes bouncing off the stone walls of the darkened buildings.

A sudden beam of light struck him in the face.

"Halt thou!" said a voice in Genedekish.

He halted, as the beam was electric powered, and that meant cops —unless the flashlight had been stolen.

"Over the head, the hands put thee!"

Smisson raised his hands carefully, well above his head, as the holder of the flashlight approached. There were two of them, and they were cops, all right. And you didn't get wise with a Nayaproosher cop if he didn't know who you were.

"Who art thou?" asked one of them—the one who was not holding the electric torch. His revolver was leveled at Smisson's navel.

"I am Ur Gar Smisson, to the Broklanian Advisory attached," Smisson answered in the same tongue.

The flashlight beam immediately dropped to Smisson's feet.

"Oh. So. Thy pardon," said the gun-wielder. "Hast thou identification?"

"It gives a card case in the belt."

The policeman took out the case and riffled through it until he came to Smisson's Advisory identity card. He examined the photograph, looked at Smisson's face, and reluctantly holstered his gun.

"Again, thy pardon, Ur Advisor. Thou wert for someone else taken."

"A nothing, I assure thee," Smisson said, lowering his hands and retrieving the identification case.

Without further apologies, the pair cut their light and faded back into the mist from whence they came.

But the flashlight had given them away when they pointed it at Smisson's boots. They were looking for muggers. They had heard his soft footsteps and assumed that he was wearing cloth shoes instead of the normal Genedeker's hard leather footgear.

Smisson started on down the street. And the footsteps he had been following started again. Evidently, the person who was preceding him down the street had heard the cops and seen the light and had stopped to watch.

Then he noticed that the footsteps far behind him were moving again. He stopped, listening. The rear footsteps were fading. The fellow must have changed his mind after seeing the police.

Another set of brisk clicks proceeded from a side street to his left, approaching.

Smisson shook his head to clear it. He was getting jumpy. There was no reason to suppose that everybody in Nayaproosh was out to get him. He started walking again.

As he neared the Canal, the neighborhood changed. Instead of walled-in residence, there were shops and taverns. Here, there were more people, and the mist was partially dispelled by the flickering orange of torches set in wall brackets here and there.

Along the Canal itself, the street was wide and reasonably well lit.

He finally found the place he was looking for and pushed the door open. The headwaiter bustled up solicitously.

"Good ifning, sir," he said in strained Broklanian. "For one?"

"Two." Smisson said. "I'm waiting for someone."

"Come, sir."

The headwaiter led him across the huge room to the dark, curtained booths in the rear. He drew a curtain aside and lit the candle on the table. Smisson ordered a cold drink and when it was brought, he asked the waiter to close the curtain.

He sat there for several minutes, coddling the drink and watching the flickering of the candle.

Then, abruptly, the curtain parted, and someone else slid into the booth across the table from him.

"I wasn't sure you'd make it," said the stranger, grinning. "Sometimes the timing is a little off after seven years."

Smisson studied the face. It was thoroughly familiar; almost as well-known to him as his own. But he couldn't place it.

"Do I know you?"

"Sure," the stranger grinned. "You ought to."

Smisson looked puzzled. "The name—"

"—escapes you. It's supposed to. You'll find out who I am soon enough. These things can't be piled on too fast, you know. I suppose there are some things that are worrying you?"

"Who am I?" Smisson asked abruptly.

"That," said the familiar stranger, "is something I can't tell you; you'll figure it out for yourself soon enough.

"All I want to do is reassure you, which is something that has to come from outside to reinforce the mental braces that have already been implanted in your mind. Without them, by the way, you'd probably end up in a psychotic ward very quickly."

The stranger reached over, took Smisson's drink, and tasted it appreciatively. "How do you feel about losing Gar Smisson?"

Smisson shrugged. "I can accept the realization that Gar Smisson, *per se*, has no real existance, but I would like to have some kind of identity of my own."

"That isn't necessary, is it? You are *you*, aren't you? Is it so important to have a label? A name?"

"No. No, I suppose not. It's the missing twenty years that bother me. What kind of person was I? Naturally, I rather liked Gar Smisson's personality; will that change?"

"Not appreciably." The stranger paused a moment, then said earnestly: "Do you trust me?"

"Naturally. Haven't I always?"

The stranger smiled. "Sure you have. Now listen. There are certain things you must know."

"About what?"

"About Earth."

VI

Gar Smisson walked slowly along the bank of the Grand Canal. The uneven torchlight was reflected fitfully from the water, which, at high tide, was only a few feet below the stone abutment. It was almost as high as the tide could get: Ine was directly overhead and Swy and the sun were on the other side of the planet.

It was well after midnight, but Smisson was in no hurry to get home. He was busy thinking on a problem. He was trying to remember what the stranger had looked like.

He couldn't do it. No matter how hard he tried, the automatic blocks in his mind kept the memory of that face buried deep in his subconscious. He couldn't even remember how the stranger's voice had sounded, though the words were imprinted clearly on his brain.

all right, so what? i'll know soon enough—i'm better off not knowing at this stage of the game —i wonder how deeply earth is mixed up in this? and how much do the broklanian higher-ups know? and what does genedek . . .

His thoughts were scattered suddenly by a yell.

He had walked to a point where the torches no longer illuminated the street; only the moon's beams forced their way through the wispy fog.

He could hear sounds of a struggle ahead. Quickly, he drew his Lindhurst and sprinted forward on silent, spongey soles.

He hadn't gone more than fifteen yards before the fog seemed to unfold suddenly from around four figures. Three of them were upright; the third was lying face down on the cobblestones.

The three upright figures were a struggling mass of cloaks and arms. Smisson noticed, as he ran, that the prone man was wearing a uniform — the uniform of the Nayaproosher Militia!

It didn't take long to separate the two attackers from the attacked. The victim was a woman.

Smisson grabbed one of the men's cloaks and jerked. The thug fell backwards a few steps, and before he could regain his balance, Smisson slammed him hard against the side of the head with the barrel of his gun. The man spun and fell—right over the parapet and into the canal.

Smisson ignored him and turned toward the fight again. The other man had released the woman, who had dropped to her knees, and was pointing something at Smis-

son's chest. Without hesitating, Smisson fired the Lindhurst Fifty.

There was a faint sizzling hiss as the beam ionized the air to a pale violet. The man's gun jerked wide and cracked out one shot in the sudden violent spasm that came before death.

Smisson walked over and helped the woman to her feet.

"Are you all right?" he asked in Broklanian. Then, quickly, he repeated the question in Genedekish.

"Thanks," she said shakily. "I am well. How is the captain?"

Smisson had thought that the officer had simply been taking his girl friend for a walk, but when the full moonlight hit her face, he knew better.

The woman was Fra Ilda Ryner, wife of the Burkmiser f'Nayaproosh!

oh, brother! am i the dashing hero! Smisson thought suddenly.

The captain was all right; there was a lump on his head, but it was nothing serious. From what Smisson could gather, one of the goons had hit him from behind and then the pair had tried to rob Fra Ryner.

but where did a mugger get a pistol? Smisson asked himself. He answered the question before he could say anything aloud. One glance told him that the captain's holster was empty.

He picked the weapon from where it had fallen and handed it back to the dazed officer. Then he turned to the Burkfra.

"Where art thou going?"

"I am to the home going. The car is but two blocks from here."

"Guarded?"

"Naturally. The other two of my bodyguards are therein."

"Excellent. If the captain will thee walk with there, I will thee some paces behind for protection follow," Smisson volunteered.

"Our thanks. It is a good plan," the Burkfra smiled. "Come thee, Captain."

It was less than five minutes walk, and absolutely nothing out of the ordinary happened.

When they reached the car, there was some excitement when the captain told the other two officers what had happened.

With a pleasant smile, Fra Ryner asked: "What is the name? Thou art a Broklanian, by thy speech and clothing. And—" she added, "by thy weapon."

He told her who he was.

"Ah. So." Her smile was dazzling. "You must permit us to drive you to the Advisory, good sir."

He noticed that she had used the Genedekish personal "da" in-

stead of the most formal "zay" in the second person singular.

That meant one of two things. Either she was insulting him, or she was telling him she liked him. Somehow, Smisson did not think it was the former.

"It is not necessary, good lady. My car at the Konistross lot is parked."

"Get in," she held the door open. "We will take you."

Smisson did as he was told. The woman said nothing more to him as they drove, and Smisson felt a little piqued. Not because of her silence, but because she hadn't recognized him. Evidently he hadn't made much of an impression when he had met her at the Imperial Ball eight months before.

He consoled himself with the thought that the moonlight was, after all, very dim.

All the way to the parking lot, he kept wondering whether she would ask what in the devil a high Broklanian Advisory officer was doing out on the streets of Nayaproosh at this time of night, but either the question never occurred to her or she didn't think it polite to ask.

At the lot, he got out of the car and thanked her.

"It is I who should give the thanks," she said softly. "It is I who had the life saved."

She offered her hand, and he took it gravely. She squeezed quickly and withdrew. "Goodnight, Ur Smisson," she whispered. Then the captain drove on, and she was gone.

wow! Smisson thought dazedly, *what a night! and what a woman!*

VII

Ping! Ping! Ping! Ping!

"it will take seven years, according to the computation," the controller said. "but the work is dangerous—very dangerous—"

i don't mind—i think i can do it myself—the conditioning, I mean —"

"no, not completely. the change is too—"

Ping! Ping! Ping! Ping!

"—too much alone, my dear." (the controller had suddenly become a woman) "you must accept my help."

"but you can't sweetheart! there is danger!"

there is danger! danger!

PINGPINGPINGPINGP I N G-PINGPING!

Smisson lifted his head groggily from the pillow. The damned phone was ringing! And on *urgent*, too.

"Yes?" he called sleepily. There was no answer; his voice had been

pitched too low. "Yes?" he said again.

The phone clicked, and Gorse's image swam into view.

"Smisson! What's the matter? I've been calling you for ten minutes!"

Smisson sat up on the edge of the bed. "Sorry. I stayed up late last night. What time is it?"

"The eighth hour. I know it's early, but this is urgent."

"What's up?"

"The Burkmiser has decided to produce his proof. And if you ask me, it's damned convincing. His car pulled up fifteen minutes ago with a load of ice in the trunk. And a rather gruesome monster in the ice.

"He says it's the pilot of the alien ship. Get up to the autopsy room fast."

Smisson was already dressing by the time Gorse cut the circuit.

Five minutes later, he was sprinting across the Advisory compound toward the Medical Building, and three minutes after that, he was in the autopsy ward.

Gorse was waiting for him. "Come on," he said, "the thing is in room four." He turned and stalked heavily down the corridor.

There were ten or twelve people in room four. Smisson knew most of them, but two figures in particular caught his interest. One was the head physician, Dr. Cordie; The other was Ur Koll Ryner, de Burkmiser f'Nayaproosh.

Gorse was heading for them, so Smisson brought up in the rear.

"Ur Burkmiser, you know our Technical Advisor Smisson, do you not?"

"I do indeed. How are you, Ur Smisson?" His voice had the cool friendliness of a diplomat's, nothing more.

He was a big man, a good four inches taller than Smisson, and a good deal wider across the shoulders. His blond hair was cropped close to his skull, and the friendliness of his smile was belied by the dark coldness of his blue eyes.

"I'm glad to see your excellency again," Smisson said cordially.

i wonder if he knows what happened last night?

maybe he does—and maybe he doesn't—it might be that she wasn't supposed to be out roaming the streets—

Then, quite suddenly, the Burkmiser's left eyes closed in a solemn wink. Smisson realized that neither Gorse nor Dr. Cordie could see the left eye.

"Well, let's go over and take a look at the thing," Gorse said. "Dr. Cordie wants to get to work with a scalpel."

Everybody crowded around the shrouded form on the operating table, and Dr. Cordie had to ask them to stand back. He was a fussy man; the tall, lean, old-maidish type.

As though he were unveiling a statue, he pulled off the rough Genedekish canvas in which the thing was wrapped. There was a soft gasp that came from all over the room.

The six cameras that had been set up around the table were cut in, and Dr. Cordie began to speak into the microphone for the record. He'd been doing that sort of thing for years, and he was good at it; he addressed his remarks to whoever might review the film later.

"As you can see, the being is somewhat smaller than a man, although definitely manlike in shape. This clothing—" He turned to the Burkmiser. "I assume, Ur Burkmiser, that this is the clothing you found on the cadaver?"

"It is."

"Thank you. The clothing consists of a tight-fitting shirt of a bright red color, a pair of tight trousers of the same color, and a pair of blue boots, into which the trousers are tucked.

"Notice the peculiar construction of the boot. It is more like a mitten than a foot covering, and the material is quite pliable.

"Let's see if we can remove the clothing."

The remark was purely rhetorical, but it had more meaning than the doctor suspected.

There was a seam running down the front of the suit, and the doctor examined it for fastenings. There weren't any.

"This is odd; perhaps it would be better to cut the clothing off and try to unfasten it later."

He took a scalpel and went to work on the cloth at the neck. After a full minute of hard cutting, there was a small nick in the fabric.

"My word!" said Cordie feelingly.

"Why don't you try that belt, Doctor?" Smisson asked.

The belt did it. When Cordie unfastened it, the whole seam up and down the front opened up. It turned out that the alien was wearing a one-piece coverall.

The being was apparently a female.

The boots slid off easily, and the whole of the monster was exposed to view.

"The purpose of the boots," Dr. Cordie said, "can now be seen. The feet are equipped for grasping. Observe the long great toe, which is opposed, thumblike.

"The skin is quite dark and totally hairless.

"The face is, perhaps, the most striking feature of the being. (Close-up on number four, please.) As you can see the jaw is considerably longer and the brow ridge is much more pronounced than that of a human. The teeth—" He pulled the lower jaw down, and another gasp could be heard in the room. "—the teeth are longer and sharper than those of a human. I should say that the animal was carnivorous in life."

Smisson watched carefully as the doctor examined the rest of the cadaver. Cordie finally picked up a scalpel and began the dissection with an abdominal incision. After a few minutes, he announced that the monster was definitely a functional female.

There were several whispered comments around the room at this news. Gorse murmured: "A matriarchal society might be pretty hard to deal with."

To Smisson's surprise, the Burkmiser said: "I agree. We certainly could not deal with them on logical terms alone. I fear we shall have to fight."

VIII

It was nearly four hours later that Dr. Cordie announced that any further work would have to be done microscopically and serologically. The show broke up.

Smisson, Gorse, and the Burkmiser went straight to Gorse's office, where they sat down in a trio of big easy chairs. The two Broklanians waited for the Genedeker to talk.

He was not in the least hesitant about doing so. "Gentlemen," he said, pulling an envelope out of a jacket pocket, "I have here a commission drawn up by the Grand Council of the Nine Burks of Genedek and signed by His Imperial Majesty, de Konik f'n Genedek, which authorizes me to speak for the council in this matter. In other words—" He handed over the paper. "—I make the terms."

"I see," said Gorse, glancing over the document.

"I presume you are convinced that the ship is of alien origin?" the Burkmiser asked.

Gorse had to admit that he was, and Smisson nodded his head.

"Very well, then, here's what we want. One: your power source. We know that no ordinary power supply could lift a ship off a planet, much less take it to the stars."

Gorse and Smisson exchanged glances. So the Genedekers had figured out the existence of atomic

energy, eh?

"Two: Armament. We want to know how to manufacture energy weapons.

"Three: The starship drive. We want full particulars on how to build and maintain our own fleet of interstellar ships.

"Four: Medicine—"

The Burkmiser's voice went on and on. When he had finished, Gorse looked at him in silence for a moment.

Finally, Gorse said: "I'm afraid it can't be done, Ur Burkmiser. You don't seem to understand that these things can't just be given to you like a handful of coins. It would take years—decades!"

The nobleman looked at him coldly. "You refuse, then?"

"Look here, your excellency," Gorse said. "We are convinced that the ship is alien, all right, but how do we know that it contains anything we don't have? How can we be sure that there is any superior science represented?"

"Let us look at the ship—investigate it. Then, if there is sufficient reason to suppose that it represents a danger to Genedek and to the Federation, we will have to take emergency steps. But to simply throw this technology on the Genedekish markets—like you seem to think we should—would disrupt the whole Genedekish economy system.

"I think Smisson will back me up on that."

Smisson frowned. "It would take time, all right."

"Very well, gentlemen," the Burkmiser said, rising from his chair, "it appears we have reached a stalemate. I'll let you think it over. Good day."

Withot another word, he walked out the door.

"He's just like Mulla," Gorse said heavily. "And just like all Genedekers—stubborn to the last."

"Well, what next?" Smisson wanted to know.

Gorse spread his hands eloquently. "I have a little plan in mind. As soon as I can fit the pieces together properly, I'll let you know."

Smisson interpreted this, correctly, as a dismissal.

"Okay. I'm going out to get a bite of lunch."

He thought he knew where he could get his lunch free.

Outside, he climbed into his car and drove slowly around the streets of Nayaproosh to allow the Burkmiser plenty of time to get home. It was a good half hour later when he pulled up in front of the great walled castle where the ruler of the Burk of Nayaproosh lived.

He parked his car outside and

strode to the sentry on duty.

"Please announce thee to the Ur Burkmiser, Ur Gar Smisson," he said in Genedekish.

The sentry picked up a handphone and called in. There was a moment of conversation, and finally the sentry said: "The Ur Burkmiser is expecting thee. Go thee through the main entrance, sir."

The Burkmiser was not only expecting him; he was actually smiling when Smisson met him in the cavernous front hall.

"Come, Ur Smisson! You're just in time for lunch!"

Smisson smiled inwardly at his own cleverness. "I'll admit, frankly, that I'm starved, Excellency," he said aloud.

"Then this morning's autopsy did not upset your digestion?"

"Not in the least."

As they ascended the great stone stairway, the nobleman's smile became a bit sardonic. "I fear I must apologize, my friend. We do not have elevators here."

" 'Exercise is good, not only for the body, but for the soul'," Smisson quoted.

The Burkmiser's laugh was a short, sharp bark. "I see you read our literature. I shall consider myself squelched and go on to other subjects.

"I want to thank you for saving Ilda's life last night. I said nothing in front of your superior in case you did not want it known that you were—ah—shall we say —pursuing the night life of Nayaproosh."

"It was nothing, I assure you," Smisson replied, trying to inject just the proper amount of modesty into his voice.

"Ah, nothing to you, perhaps, but a great deal to me."

They had reached the upper floor and entered the big dining room. Suddenly, there was a burst of noise from the adjoining room; a door burst open, and two children, a boy and a girl, ran toward them shouting: *"Vada! Vada! De Mooda ez—"*

"Shh! Shh! Be thee quiet, children!" cautioned the nobleman. "We the visitor have!"

He introduced them solemnly to Smisson. "Ur Smisson, this is my eldest and my heir, Onz. And this is my sweetheart, Borta."

Smisson shook hands gravely.

"Have you eaten, children?" the Burkmiser asked.

"Iah!" they chorused.

"Very well, then. Go and play. Father has much business."

They left with all the energy of a pair of hurricanes.

"How old are they?" Smisson

asked conversationally.

"Onz is ten, Borta eight. It's amazing how they tackled to Ilda."

"What? Isn't—?"

"Oh. I thought you knew. My first wife died when Borta was born." The nobleman was almost apologetic. "I married Ilda a year later."

Smisson could only say: "I see."

At lunch, Smisson found that the Burkmiser did not go in for much pomp and ceremony. A servant set the table and brought in the meal. Smisson had long since grown used to Genedekish tablewear, and handled it as well as the implements he was accustomed to on Broklan.

During the meal, they engaged in small talk, but after it was over, and the table had been cleared, the Burkmiser leaned back in his chair and said:

"I presume you came here on business, Ur Smisson. May I ask what it is?"

"Certainly. I have—" He stopped. Ilda had just come in the door.

"Hello, darling. And good day to you, Ur Smisson," she said, smiling. "I did not know we had a guest."

"Come in, my dear," said the Burkmiser. "Ur Smisson and I were about to discuss our mutual problem." He turned to Smisson. "I hope it will be all right for my wife to listen; she has quite a good head on her, and often helps me with problems of state."

"An honor," said Smisson, rising. "I should have known that one so beautiful would also be possessed of other qualities equally valuable."

"Ilda seated herself. "Do go on, Ur Smisson."

The Burkmiser grinned. "Do you mean that he should go on with the flattery, Ilda, or with the business?"

"The business, my dear. I get quite enough flattery."

Smisson swallowed uncomfortably and wished he had kept his mouth shut. "I would like it understood, Ur Burkmiser, that I can not speak officially for the government of Broklan nor for the Advisory. I came as a friend."

"Very well. I accept that."

"Fine. Then I have a proposition to make."

IX

"First," said Smisson, "I want you to remember how long it took to build all the factories that are on Genedek. "The first automobile plant took twenty years. After

that, of course, the others were easier to build, but the *first*—twenty years.

"The tidal power plants took almost as long, and even now they do not turn out enough power to light the homes of every citizen. The expense is terrific, as you well know.

"But what I'm emphasizing here is not a matter of expense, but of time. You have to have the tools to build the tools. To build a spaceship, if we started right now to help you, and gave you everything available, would take thirty-five years at least.

"Gorse was being perfectly honest when he said that at this stage, Genedek can not absorb all the technology that Broklan can give her."

"Then we are at a stalemate," the Burkmiser shrugged.

"Not necessarily. I have an idea. Suppose a treaty were negotiated which would permit Genedekish students to be educated in schools on Broklan, with full rights as Broklanian citizens.

"Also, you would ask for transportation rights on Broklanian vessels."

The Burkmiser frowned. "I don't quite see—"

"Certainly, my dear," Ilda interrupted. "That way, there would be no way for the Broklanians to hide anything from us.

"I have only one suggestion. In order to make sure that we could have students there, the treaty should specify that a certain number of students would be accepted, and that their transportation fee would be within a certain set figure."

"That, too," Smisson agreed.

"Of course, you realize that the Teknigesheft would object violently to this proposal?" the nobleman commented.

Smisson nodded. "That, I fear, is *your* problem."

"Do you think, then, that Ur Gorse would agree to such a treaty?"

"Not immediately, but eventually," Smisson said. "Let him stew in his own juice for a while. Bring it up later."

"Tell me, Ur Smisson," the Burkmiser said suavely, "why do you tell us all this? What interest is it of yours to tell us what sort of treaty would be the best and the most acceptable?"

"I'll tell you what my interest is. Quite frankly, I'm afraid of those aliens. I don't think it should be necessary for you to have to threaten us to get what you deserve from Broklan. This is, in my opinion, an emergency.

"But it takes a kick in the pants for some of these red tape handlers to see that the defense of Genedek against alien invaders is a problem that requires the complete co-operation of not only Broklan and Genedek, but all the other planets of the Federation."

"I see. What do you think, Ilda?"

"I think Ur Smisson is right. I think you should take the plan to Ur Gorse as soon as you—or Ur Smisson—thinks he will be ripe."

Smisson glanced at his watch. "Well, I'll have to be getting back to the Advisory. Thanks for the lunch, your excellency."

"Do come again," Ilda said softly.

X

As he drove back toward the Advisory, Smisson consciously brought back to mind what the friend/stranger had said to him the night before.

"Doesn't it seem strange to you that the planets of the Federation haven't progressed any farther than they have in a thousand years? After all, they didn't lose everything during the Colonial Interregnum."

"Two things kept them back. Too much pressure from their environment, and no war. Until a culture realizes that research for the sake of knowledge alone is worth the effort and time and money spent, the only way to advance technology is to enforce it by war.

"The environments of the so-called Earthlike planets were tough to fight, but you don't progress rapidly when you're fighting things that have no intelligence. If you get a slight edge, you're content to let it stay that way.

"You find a poison that kills insects without killing everything else in the vicinity, and you start spraying. Not until the only insects remaining are those immune to the poison do you go to the trouble of inventing another poison. There is no all-out war; only a delaying action.

"Why? Because the enemy isn't trying to outsmart you.

"The various planets of the Federation had to fight petty criminals and even organized gangs during their formative years. There were even small revolutions. But they found out early in their history that war didn't pay; if they took out the time to fight each other, the planet would take over.

"It was a split in the Four Horsemen of the Apocolypse with Famine, Pestilence, and Death tromping all over War before he could even get his horse started.

"There was a parallel society a long time ago on Earth; the Eskimos. They had individual fights, and tribal quarrels over hunting and fishing rights, but they were too busy looking for food and fighting the cold to have a real war."

And Smisson had said: "Then the only reason Broklan got where it is was through the records left on the Sealed Ship by the First Colonists?"

"Right. Broklan was originally settled, not by colonists, but by the survivors of a scientific expedition. The ship was sealed when those men realized that the information in it could not be used for many generations. They sealed the ship in such a way that only a competent knowledge of electronics would enable anyone to open the door. The ship's hull couldn't have been breached by any but civilized and advanced methods. No savage or barbarian could have done it.

"But that heritage, without the proper impetus behind it, has actually caused Broklan to stagnate. They don't do much real research. They're trying to solve some of the old problems left behind in the Sealed Ship, but they haven't progressed as they should have in the past eighty years.

"If one planet—just one—had balked at Broklanian domination, the whole Federation would have been in an uproar. But these centuries of enforced peace are a heritage they've never forgotten. It never occurs to any large group to take anything by force. A few lazy individuals may become thieves, but if any large segment of the population begins to suffer from a lack of the necessities of life, it means that the environment is beginning to get the best of them. And if the battle against the planet is being lost in one place, it can spread quickly. The rest of the society is forced to come to the rescue whether they want to or not.

"At the same time, they don't dare give too much or they'll lose out themselves. It's a check and balance system; give a little, but not too much.

"So Broklan found that conquest was easy. The Broklanians landed, introduced themselves, and took over. They said they were there to help, and the natives believed them. After all didn't the more fortunate always help their needier brothers?

"And keep it in mind that Broklan believes that fantasy, too. They had, and still have, every intention of helping their fellow men. But they have the wrong attitude; they have developed a maternalistic feel-

ing about the colonies.

"Don't let junior play with matches, he might burn the house down. The house, in this case, is the Federation.

"But the natives of the various planets got wise to this pretty quickly; they knew that the guy who comes to help doesn't necessarily give you everything he's got. It's an automatic habit of this culture. The peoples of the various colonies differ in a lot of ways, but in that respect, they think alike.

"Just as, in the old days, they had aided their friends by giving them a little food, but keeping most of it hidden away, they now gave a little knowledge and kept the vast majority hidden. They didn't realize the essential difference between the two.

"So now the Federation is actually growing stale. It really isn't a federation except in name. They called it that eighty years ago because it promised a bright new future. But Broklan couldn't break a habit of eight centuries in eight decades.

"Therefore, the only way to break that habit is to break it by force!"

By force. The friend/stranger had emphasized the point.

And now—

and now, by god, the force is being applied—broklan and genedek are in for something they've never foreseen—

War!

XI

Smisson lay quietly in bed. He had had only a few hours sleep the night before, had worked like a madman all afternoon, and here it was, nearly midnight. And he wasn't sleeping.

In the thirty days that had passed since the landing of the alien ship, the affairs of the Advisory had come almost to a standstill. The data on Project Search had been filed in the memory banks of the great master computer, but nobody had bothered to look at it.

Of vastly greater importance was the affair of "The Burkmiser's Spaceship." His excellency still refused to allow anyone but Genedekers aboard it, and nobody at the Advisory seemed to know what, if anything, the Teknigesheft had discovered about the vessel.

Gorse was inclined to doubt that the native technicians could make anything out of whatever equipment the aliens had unwittingly placed in their hands. After all, hadn't the members of the Teknigesheft been selected for their lack of creative ability? But Smis-

son had put a bee in his bonnet by pointing out that a problem in analysis was the direct opposite of a problem in synthesis.

And Gorse's hope that the alien ship contained nothing new to Broklanian science had been utterly destroyed by the old coverall suit that Dr. Cordie had removed from the monster's body. The seam that ran down the front seemed to be controlled by something in the belt buckle which held the edges magnetically, and the cloth itself was of some incredibly tough plastic.

Smisson paced the floor.

At least the chaos of his own mind had settled somewhat. In the atmosphere of growing tension, he had found his own mental processes actually becoming clearer, faster.

He glanced around the room. He felt nervous, edgey. He—

The thing came in the window at that point.

It took only one glance for Smisson to recognize it. He grabbed at the dresser, where he had laid his Lindurst an hour before. The thing had barely moved more than a few feet when the hot, hissing beam from the energy weapon hit it full in the chest. It kept on coming, and for a moment Smisson almost panicked. Then he realized that the beast really was dead, it was the floating motion that gave the effect of life.

Nevertheless, he kept his weapon out and his eyes on the floating corpse as he pressed the EMERGENCY switch on the visiphone. Somewhere off in the distance, an alarm bell clanged.

"Security Department here!" said the voice from the phone. "What is it Advisor?"

Smisson didn't even bother looking at the face on the screen; he watched the floating corpse and said: "I don't know! Get some men up here in a hurry! And get hold of Advisor Gorse! Snap it up!"

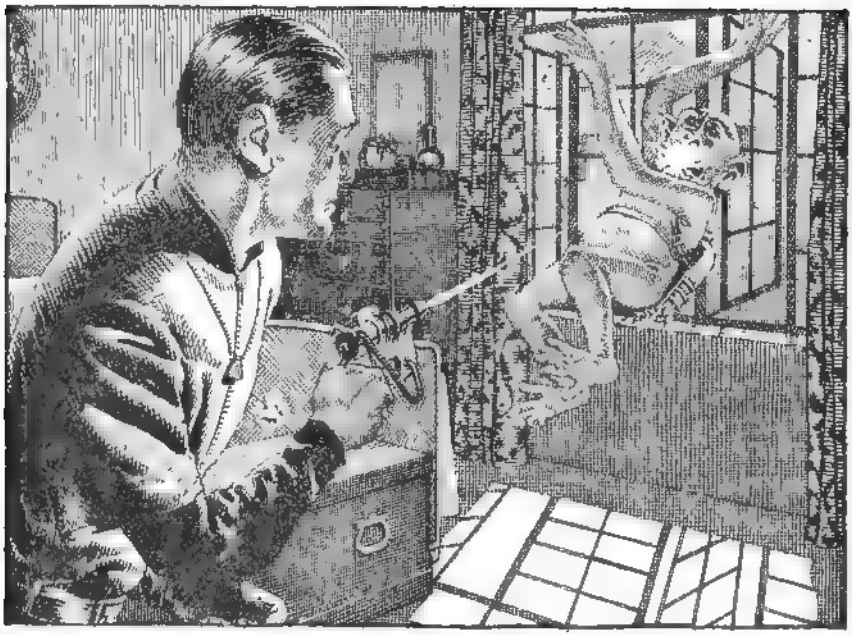
It took less than two minutes. Four Security men piled into the room with drawn weapons, and even when they saw that Smisson had the situation under complete control, they were reluctant to reholster their guns.

"What happened, sir?" asked one of the officers.

Smisson gestured with the Lindurst. "That thing came in the window; I fired before it could do anything."

The officer looked at the dead alien hanging easily in the air. "What—what's holding it up?" he asked in a strangled voice.

"I don't know. Here." He



handed his gun to the Security man nearest him and walked over to where the alien hung. Its feet failed to touch the floor by a good two feet, which put its head on a level with Smisson's own.

Warily, Smisson circled the beast. Nothing happened.

Finally, he put a hand on the alien's shoulder and pushed down. There was a definite resistance, as though he were pressing on a spring. When the being's feet finally touched the floor, Smisson released his hold. The alien drifted back up to its former height and stayed there.

Then Smisson tried lifting. The body was fairly light, but it wasn't weightless. Smisson lifted it a couple of feet, then dropped it. Again the same level was reached and maintained.

Smisson! What the devil's— *My God!"* It was Gorse. "What happened? *Quickly!"*

Smisson swung around to face his superior, who was still standing by the door in his nightdress. He described what had happened as concisely as possible.

Gorse walked over to the window and looked out. "But how could it get up here? You're six floors from the ground, and there's nothing it could hang on to!"

"I'll show you, said Smisson confidently. He grabbed an arm of the dead alien and led it across the floor as one would a child—or as one would pull a balloon.

"If you'll notice," he said, "the feet are on a level with the window sill. Look." Still keeping a hold on the arm, he pushed the corpse out the window. It floated quietly.

"See that pack on its back? I'll bet anything it's some kind of gravity-nullifying mechanism. It's probably set for some definite height—or, rather, some definite distance from the planet's center of gravity."

"Why did you kill it?" Gorse asked. "We might have got some information out of it alive."

Smisson looked sourly at his superior's heavily-jowled face. "What would *you* do if that thing came floating in the window at you? Ask it to tea? Or call a Security agent to please come get it and lead it to a nice, cozy cell?"

Gorse looked at the corpse ruefully. "I suppose you're right." He paused for a moment, an odd look in his eye. "Do you realize what a find this is? Antigravity! We'll have to get that thing down to the lab right away!"

Smisson looked at him coldly. "Do you realize what its presence here means? Gorse—*that thing was spying on us!*" Gorse paled a little, and Smisson went on. "How many others are there out there, floating around in the dark? What have they found out already?"

The leader of the squad of Security men was quick on the uptake. Smisson had hardly finished before the officer was at the phone, barking orders. Within seconds, the Advisory area was ablaze with lights and spotlights were probing the air.

XII

"It's operation is simple," Smisson said. "The height control knob is here, with this vernier for adjustment to a fraction of an inch." He shrugged into the harness and demonstrated by floating up to the level of the table top.

"Once the balance point has been achieved, the object is maintained at that point. The energy loss or gain is—"

A head stuck itself through the laboratory door. "Advisor Smisson? Chief Gorse would like to have you come up to his office right away."

"Right. Tell him I'll be there shortly." He lowered himself to the floor and cut off the power. "Well, there it is." He handed the alien device to one of the research

men who had been watching the demonstration. "That, gentlemen, is Problem Number One. Find out how that belt works."

He walked out of the room and headed toward Gorse's office.

Gorse was waiting for him. With him was Burkmiser f'Nayaproosh. Both of them looked uneasy.

"The Burkmiser's seen that thing you shot last night," Gorse said. "And I've seen the one he brought in."

"Another one?"

The Burkmiser nodded. "This one was in the streets. It looked as though it had dropped from a very great height."

Smisson sat down. "Well, gentlemen, what are we going to do?"

Gorse shrugged massively. "There is hardly any question, is there? We have already come to terms on a treaty.

"Our whole trouble lies in the lack of communication with Broklan. If the aliens try anything drastic before the ship comes, we'll have to hold them off ourselves. We don't know anything about them. We have no idea what they want. We can't—" He stopped himself abruptly when he realized that his voice was beginning to sound panicky.

"The point is that I'd like to put you in charge of all manufacturing—provided, of course, that his Imperial Majesty will okay the deal.

"Meanwhile, we are going to fly to Oslin. De Konik is calling a meeting of the Grand Council of the Nine Burks, and we're to be there."

Oslin was the capitol of the planet—or, at least, the inhabited portions of the island chains. His Imperial Majesty de Konik f'n Genedek was almost a rubber stamp as far as ruling the planet went, but his signature was needed on every document passed by the Council of Nine.

Smisson said: "When do we leave?"

"Immediately." It was the Burkmiser who answered. "Ur Gorse has so kindly asked us to be flown in his machine."

"Who all's going?"

"Four of us," Gorse answered. "You and I and the Burkmiser and his wife. You'd better pack a bag. Meet us at the landing in half an hour."

"Right."

Half an hour later, the craft was lifting from the broad roof of the Administration Building and climbing toward the sky in the north.

Smisson wondered vaguely why the Burkmiser had brought Ilda along. A woman might help her

husband in affairs of state, but it seemed odd that she should wield so much influence in the Burkmiser's life. Still, perhaps it was better that—

"Is my hair mussed, Ur Smisson?"

"What?"

"I asked," Ilda repeated, "if my hair were mussed. You were looking at me so peculiarly."

"Oh. Was I? I'm sorry. I have so many things on my mind. I wasn't really looking at you."

"You weren't? Am I that unattractive?"

The Burkmiser had been watching the byplay. "You will find Ur Smisson, that that is a favorite trick of Genedekish women. They put a man on a fence and then push and pull at him until he falls. And no matter which side he falls on, he gets hurt."

"That doesn't just apply to Genedekish women," Smisson grinned. "It happens to be the favorite conversational gambit of the female fifty percent of the whole human race."

Ilda burst into laughter. "It is a nasty trap, isn't it? No matter what you say, you're wrong."

That set Smisson to thinking.

The airship landed on the tiny landing field just outside the Imperial City on the island of Oslin, and the four were driven to the Grand Palace by a car sent out to meet them.

The driver, a tall, straight young man in the uniform of the Imperial Guard, opened the door for them and said in Genedekish: "His majesty would like immediately the Ur Burkmiser and the Ur Chief Advisor to see. It is not expected that the nine full council will be in less than four days here."

"Four days, eh?" said Gorse as he settled himself in the cushions. "I hope we can get started drafting tentative plans before that."

"We can, I'm sure, Ur Advisor," the Burkmiser said.

Smisson noticed that both of them looked worried and a little frightened.

Ilda was saying: "Tell me, Ur Smisson, why didn't the Broklanian government build the Advisory here on Oslin instead of on Nayaproosh?"

"For the same reason that the First Colonists landed on Nayaproosh. The island is fairly large and flat, and therefore affords a good place for a spaceport. As you know, we've had to do quite a bit of work on the present site, but it still isn't as level as the city.

"Very likely, the level area between the Swartstross, in the north of the city, and the Undelstross,

in the south, an area of about three square miles, is the natural flat upon which the First Colonists of Genedek landed."

"Neither of you two seem to be very interested in this crisis," Gorse said testily.

Ilda looked at and through him. "I hardly think it necessary to brood about it all the time, Ur Gorse. When the time comes to act, I can assure you there will be plenty of action."

XIII

During the four days that it took for the Burkmisers of Genedek to arrive by sea—very few owned aircraft—both Gorse and Smisson kept in contact by phone with the Advisory at Nayaproosh.

On the first day, an agreement was made with his majesty that, since the proposed treaty would almost certainly be acceptable to the Council, Broklanian and Genedekish technologists would be permitted to study the ship at Nayaproosh beginning immediately.

On the second day, Subadvisor Ormsly called to report on the antigravity device.

"Well, we've done it now. We finally got that case open, but now the thing won't work."

Smisson frowned. "Break it opening it?"

Ormsly looked puzzled. "No, that's the funny thing. We decided to open it because it just suddenly quit working. One of the men dropped about ten feet when it went out. There isn't anything inside that makes sense at all. It seems to be a haphazard mess of useless gimmiks."

"Keep working on it. We'll want a detailed report later."

On the third day, Subadvisor Alavar called. "Chief, this is important! Look at this!" He held up what seemed to be a piece of aluminum foil. "The spaceship! It's corroding! Look!" He tapped the edge of the piece of metal. There was a small crackling sound, and the metal fell into a thousand sparkling pieces. "That's part of the *hull*."

"Great Heavens! How long has that been going on?"

"Ur Mulla said he noticed it several days ago. The stuff is peeling from the outside of the hull in thin layers like this, then it becomes brittle and falls apart."

"What is the metal? Have you analyzed it?"

"Sure. It seems to be an alloy of tin and magnesium."

Smisson thought a moment. "It might be the air or the moisture in the air. Look, get a spray gun and

go over the hull from stem to stern with heavy lacquer. That ought to do it."

"Right, chief. Oh, by the way, the metal is also very slightly radioactive."

"Mmmmm. Well, see what you can do. But, above all, we don't want that ship to fall apart on us! Get to work with that spray gun!"

Ormsly cut off, and Smisson leaned back with a grim smile.

The Council meeting took place on the afternoon of the fourth day, but Smisson didn't attend. He excused himself on the grounds that he had to stay in touch with the Advisory until he was actually needed by the Council; it seemed that, in spite of the spray job, the alien spaceship was really going to pieces. One of the man had actually hurt himself by sticking his foot through the floor.

But that wasn't Smisson's real reason. There were some questions he wanted to answer for himself. Several things had come to his attention; things that he had never questioned before.

He wrote them down first. The list read:

Who was behind the organization of the Froygesheft, the Genedekish Freedom Party?

When was it organized?

Why did the Burkmiser f'Nayaproosh decide to use the alien ship as a bargaining point against Broklan?

Why have I followed the instructions of an unknown (?) person so closely without asking questions?

Why am I so interested in seeing Broklan's power over Genedek broken?

Am I a Broklanian?

Smisson paused over the last question and looked at it for several minutes before he finally wrote:

Am I an Earthman?

And his mind dug deep into his hidden memories and came up with an answer:

No. You most definitely are not an Earthman!

Looking at the thing from an objective viewpoint, it would seem that his actions were being controlled by some outside influence. It was as though he had been hypnotized and the post-hypnotic suggestions were forcing him to do things he would not have done previously and which he did not realize he was going to do until he found himself doing them.

And yet, from his own subjective viewpoint, he felt that all of his actions had been predetermined by himself at some time in the past and then forgotten until the time

came to utilize the decision. And, unlike post hypnotic suggestion, the actions were capable of variations, depending on the circumstances. The important thing seemed to be, not the actions themselves, but the end results.

He knew too much, and he knew too little. He knew who and what he was not, but he did not know who or what he was. Still, it seemed that he had exactly the right amount of knowledge to carry out his plans. But what those plans were, or who had formed them, or when, he did not know.

Wait a minute! Think it out! Sure he knew who had thought out those plans! And when!

The plans were his own, that much was obvious. And he must have decided upon them at some time previous to the seven years of true memories that were available to his conscious mind.

All of which indicated—

The long-distance phone chimed again. Smisson cut it in. It was Alavar this time. In the absence of both Gorse and Smisson, he was acting head of the Advisory. He looked as though he had just been run through a washing-machine, but his voice was excited.

"Smisson! The ISS-12 wants to talk to Advisor Gorse!"

"The *WHAT*?"

"The ship—from home! From Broklan!"

"What the devil are they doing here now? They aren't due back for better than three hundred days!"

"I know! They won't tell me anything. Maybe they'll talk to you!"

"Put them on the beam; I'll see."

XIV

The face that faded into the screen was that of Ship's Officer Rost, whom Smisson had met several years before. He seemed terribly grim.

"Advisor Smisson? I'd like to speak to Chief Advisor Gorse, if I could."

"Gorse is in meeting with the Grand Council of Genedek, Officer Rost. I am in command."

"I see. Very well. We orbited ten minutes ago, and—is this beam sealed?"

"Just a second." Smisson pressed in one corner of the screen. "All sealed. Go ahead."

"Very well. I left Broklan four weeks ago to deliver the following dispatch. You'd better record."

"I am."

"The dispatch reads:

To All Advisors: The Federation of Broklan declares, as of 5/5/749, that a state of Utmost Emergency exists. In the past three months, a species of intelligent alien has been found to have landed on and committed acts of espionage on the planets of Sengai, Tayksos, Cardigon, and Vairda.

Since these aliens have in no way attempted friendly contact with humanity, it must be assumed that their intentions are unfriendly.

Therefore, for the preservation of the Federation, all Advisors are hereby notified that production of material must be stepped up immediately. Educational programs now in effect will be discarded for a program of full and open education for all citizens. Negotiations will be made with the heads of the governments of the respective planets for the use of such privately owned factories as may be available.

In addition, each Advisory, with the guidance of the Department of Security, will organize a Planetary Guard, to be made up of the citizens of the individual planets according to Directive 13-442 which will be distributed.

Until further notice, interstellar travel will be restricted to those on urgent government business. Advisors now nearing the close of their terms of office are hereby reappointed indefinitely.

Interstellar ships will henceforth contact each planet once each month for the distribution of Directives and the receipt of reports for the Home Office.

"It is signed," the Officer finished, "by the Minister of Broklan."

Smisson felt something welling up deep within him, but he held it back sharply. "You can add another planet to that list, Rost."

"What? They've been here, too?"

Smisson nodded, trying to keep from showing the emotion that was boiling up inside him. "They've been here, too," he said quietly.

Rost leaned closer to his pick-up and spoke excitedly.

"My orders were to orbit around Genedek, read off the dispatch and run off the high-speed records of the various directives so that I could go on to Rumma. But I think this takes precedence over anything else. Have you captured any of the aliens?"

"Not alive," Smisson answered, trying to keep himself calm.

"Ah, you have corpses, then. Excellent. Any artifacts?"

"A few," nodded Smisson. "If they haven't deteriorated."

"Smisson, we will land at Nayaproosh in—" he consulted his wristwatch, "—in four hours. Can you get hold of Advisor Gorse?"

"We'll be there," Smisson said fighting to keep his nerves under control.

"Good. I will see you then." The screen went blank.

Smisson almost exploded. He laughed until the tears came, and kept on laughing.

Five minutes later, he was still laughing.

XV

As soon as he could calm down, Smisson got in touch with Gorse.

The Chief Advisor was reminding the Grand Council of Genedek that he could not guarantee that the Home Office on Broklan would validate the treaty, but that as long as there was no word—for the next three hundred days, in other words, he would personally see to it that the Teknigesheft was supplied with such information as would be—

That was where Smisson interrupted him to whisper that not only would Broklan back him up, it had anticipated him.

The news was met with a general approbation from the council floor, the treaty was ratified, and the Grand Council was dismissed to committee. Only the Burkmiser f'Nayaproosh decided to go home. He had been reappointed as liason officer between the Government of Genedek and the Broklanian Advisory.

"That, I believe," said the Burkmiser as the plane lifted toward Nayaproosh, "was one of the shortest agreements on record for the Grand Council. Usually the Mountain Islanders balk at every proposal from the Equatorials."

"And the other way around," Ilda said, smiling.

Gorse seemed sunk in deep thought. Staring out the window, he said: "It's going to be long and hard. We don't know where they come from, so we can't carry the fight to their home planet, while they can and probably will carry it to ours.

"We are faced with one of the greatest crises that has ever faced the human race—that of survival.

"We—What the devil is that?" He sat up suddenly, and pointed out the window.

"That" was a large silver sphere floating in the air several hundred yards to the left of the aircraft and obviously heading toward the plane.

There was no doubt in any one

of their minds as to the object's identity. The pilot hit his throttle and gunned the engines—to no avail. The featureless sphere gained steadily.

Suddenly, the lights went out in the ship. The engines coughed and died. The pilot dead-sticked the craft down to the choppy surface of the Genedekish sea and glided to a smooth landing on the boat-like hull.

By this time, the three men had their weapons out. Smisson and Gorse had Lindursts and the Burkmiser was wielding a heavy caliber lead-thrower. They waited.

The alien ship settled down slowly, less than ten yards from the disabled aircraft. An oval port in the side of the sphere opened. It was dark inside; nothing showed.

Then, slowly, a long, tubelike thing poked it's nose out of the door. The end of it was only three inches in diameter, but it looked deadly. A faint humming came from inside the ship.

Gorse fired. The silence was broken by the crackle of ionized air as the hot beam washed over the alien weapon and died. Smisson's fire joined Gorse's.

The tube in the alien ship glowed faintly and greenishly. Chief Advisor Gorse slumped to the floor of the plane's cabin, unmoving.

The crackle of another Lindurst came from the front of the plane, heavier. and louder than Smisson's firing. The pilot was using a semi-portable.

The Burkmiser was glowering at the ship, but he couldn't find anything to fire at, and he knew his projectile weapon wasn't of much use. against the metal of the enemy ship.

He reached out for the fallen Gorse's weapon, but Smisson yelled: "Use the one you've got! Throw some lead into that hole! If enough of it ricochets around, we might hit something!"

The Burkmiser nodded and started laying down a barrage of lead.

Evidently, the aliens didn't like the power of the semi that the pilot was using from the front of the plane. The tube swivelled around and glowed greenish again. They missed, and the pilot kept on firing. Another green glow.

There was no more firing from the pilot's cabin.

The weapon moved back again to Smisson and the Burkmiser, and again the faint green could be seen. The Burkmiser of f'Nayaproosh saw Smisson drop his weapon and plunge headfirst through the open door into the sea.

Then the Burkmiser's own wea-

pon clicked emptily on a vacant chamber. He was reaching again for Gorse's Lindurst when something cold and paralyzing brought darkness to his brain.

The next thing he knew, Gorse was slapping his face.

"Come out of it! They've taken Smisson and your wife!"

That brought him out of it, all right. Ilda was gone! He shook his head. "They didn't get Smisson. He drowned. I saw it."

The alien globe was nowhere to be seen.

"Why would they want Ilda? Why?" the Genedekish nobleman wondered frantically.

Gorse frowned. "My guess is that, since they're a matriarchy, they thought that Ilda was the important one aboard. So they hit us with those sleep vibrations—or whatever they were—and took her with them."

The Genedeker's eyes narrowed in hate. "I have an idea they'll use her as hostage. If so, that means they want to contact us."

Gorse nodded. "Our best bet is to get back to Nayaproosh. Fast!"

They were in for a terrible disappointment.

XVI

The Centaurian peeled the dripping clothes off of his body while his wife laughed.

"You looked like a fish when they pulled you out," she giggled, shaking her blonde hair.

He gave her a mock glower. "I'll have you know, madam, that my imitation of a dead man falling into the sea is unequalled anywhere in the civilized Galaxy."

"And your imitation of a fish coming out of it is also unparalleled."

"If you wanted to see a really foolish expression, you should have seen my face when that 'alien' drifted in through the window of the apartment. I didn't realize until after I'd fired that the thing was already dead. It came off beautifully."

His face sobered suddenly at that. "Has the conditioning collapsed completely?"

He nodded. "I believe so. We'll have to probe it together to make sure, but I think I set up those blocks and releases pretty well."

She frowned. "Do you think it might have been better if we had done each other's conditioning instead of each doing his own?"

"Definitely not. We had to be conditioned because no truly sane person can pass himself off in an unsane society unless he assumes the insanity of that society on a

temporary basis.

"But no one knows my mind like I do. I set the releases so that they'd break up at the proper times, and I set the blocks up to prevent myself from cracking at the wrong time. No one but me could have known exactly where I'd have to set up those protective mechanisms."

She sighed. "I suppose you're right. I don't know if I would have held together, myself, if someone else had done the conditioning."

He frowned. "Did you have a rough time of it, honey?"

She rubbed her temples. "It wasn't too bad. After all, my conditioning wasn't as heavy as yours. I knew who I was and why I was there. In a society like Genedek's, it's easier to act than it is in a society like that of Broklan, where they know just enough psychology to be dangerous to you and to themselves.

"But what bothered me was the time it took for the conditioning to break down. After all, I didn't have anyone to accelerate me; you did."

"I know, darling. It's tough. But it had to be done that way. If I had come out of it too soon, the blocks might have cracked. It's too bad I had to spend a year on Genedek before the ship landed to start the breakdown, but that was just bad timing. It didn't hurt anything, really."

"No. It was about—"

She was interrupted by a faint click as an Earthman stepped through the wall. "Am I interrupting anything?" he grinned.

She flashed him a smile. "Yes, but don't let it bother you. I was just about to tell my husband what happened. You might as well have it as a report now."

The Earthman concentrated on channeling in his eidetic memory, then nodded. "Go ahead; I'm recording."

She leaned back, stretched luxuriously, then relaxed.

"As we planned, I managed to get the eye of the Burkmiser f'Nayaproosh seven years ago. His wife had died a short time previously, so he was ripe for picking. I gradually gained control over his mind until I could suggest the formation of the Freedom Society.

"That was a tough job. I didn't want to arouse too much close-knit feeling among the Genedekers, because that would prevent the eventual formation of a true federation. On the other hand, I had to get them indignant enough to demand something from the Broklanian government.

"The one slip-up was in the timing. My own slight conditioning was tied in with the arrival of my husband as Gar Smisson, which acted as a release. Unfortunately, his own powerful personality showed through the conditioning well enough for him to get the Advisory position a full year ahead of time; his own release was the arrival of the spurious alien ship that was sent down from this ship.

"Therefore, the meeting at the tavern, which was supposed to help both of us speed up the deconditioning, actually came a year too late for me. I'd already broken most of my own conditioning down.

"After that, everything went smoothly. The two extra corpses you sent down came in at precisely the right time. I dropped one into the center of the city from a height of half a mile and guided the other into my husbands bedroom for him to shoot down.

"When Broklan made the mass agreement with all the colonial planets, my husband's conditioning collapsed completely along with the last few traces of my own.

"Generally, everything went as the probability computers predicted."

"Good." The Earthman turned to the Centaurian. "Have you anything to add?"

The Centaurian was drying himself vigorously. "Very little except to comment on the effectiveness of our plans. We have fairly well established a state of war between the aliens and the Federation. This final act of murder and kidnapping ought to clinch it.

"The self-destroying mechanisms we left with them will be of no use to them within another ten days.

He grinned. "You know, when the conditioning finally broke completely—that is, when the Federation finally decided to pool its own resources—I almost laughed myself sick." He chuckled at the memory, then asked: "How is it going on the other planets?"

The Earthman grinned broadly. "Perfectly. The computations only had an error of something like one-half of one percent. With no history of war, the Federation doesn't know what war is like. It only took a few aliens to frighten them out of their complacency and their smug determination to find Earth and make it a puppet planet of Broklan.

"Accordingly, the computers now predict a new governmental setup for the Federation; one which, while not necessarily saner in itself, will lead toward sanity because they will have to study the

mental attitudes of themselves and the aliens before they can crack the puzzle.

"In addition, the new setup will be less hostile toward Earth. Within a short time, we can step in—not as Earthmen, of course—and teach them a few things about their own minds.

"Their ancestors left Earth a thousand years ago because they were afraid of change. Just as, when the research revolution began in the twentieth century, man had to adjust to technological change, so our ancestors had to adjust to sociological and mental change. But the ancestors of these colonists refused to change—they ran away.

"But they depended on supply ships to bring them the necessities of life—obviously an unsane attitude, if I ever heard of one.

"The Minister of Broklan actually asked the first man we sent to Broklan how many planets were under Earth's domination! If we had told him that there were several hundred Associated planets in that sector of the Galaxy alone, he would have thought that Earth claimed to 'dominate' that many, and he would have thought we were lying."

The Centaurian grinned. "By the way, do you happen to know latest reason they're giving for wanting to find Earth? They want to know why the Old Earth Empire fell; they felt that the Federation might fall the same way.

"It never occurred to them that trying to start an empire by landing fifty expeditions on fifty alien planets with a line of supply twenty thousand light years long is a far cry from taking over a group of planets after they are already self-supporting.

"The runaways failed, that's all."

The Centaurian's wife asked: "Is there any chance of their finding Earth?"

The Earthman shook his head. "None. When their ship reached the outpost of Corvin, they were already four years travel time from Broklan. They didn't realize that we are thousands of years ahead of them in every way. They couldn't have known that we could make it from Corvin to Broklan in a few hours. So they've been looking for Earth within a radius of two years travel time from Broklan.

"No, they'll not find Earth for a long time. And—" He shrugged. "—if they do, they won't know it. The spoken language has changed so much that we don't pronounce the word the same."

For the first time, he spoke aloud. The sound was nothing like any word used on any planet of

the Federation of Broklan. He grinned and resumed the telepathic conversation.

"I'm glad the alien idea worked so well. The second plan wasn't quite so positive in its final results within a definite period of time, even though the immediate results might have been more decisive.

"As it is, our primary plan worked; we have performed a beautiful plastic surgery job on the Federation, and within a few decades, the scars of the surgeon's knife will scarcely show."

The Centaurian shut off the dryer. "Well, I, for one, will be glad to get back home. I'm creeping well past the hundred mark now, and I want to get something done in life.

"What are you laughing at?" This was addressed to his wife.

She giggled. "I was just thinking how funny it was that the Federation's lack of knowledge scared them. They don't know a single thing about evolution, of course. The idea would never occur to them, isolated as they are from the basic stock.

"So the whole bunch of them get scared out of their wits by the corpses of a few hairless chimpanzees!"

Her husband and the Earthman joined in her laughter as the globular spaceship sped toward the edge of the Galaxy and Sector Earth.

FIFTH INDIAN LAKE CONFERENCE

By Don Ford

EVERY year the readers of science-fiction and fantasy hold a Conference at Indian Lake near Bellefontaine, Ohio, and it has grown to be one of the most popular science fiction conferences outside the World Convention.

This year the Conference is to be held on May 22 and 23, at the Hotel Ingalls, Bellefontaine, Ohio. You are cordially invited to attend, and you can make your own reservations directly with the Hotel management by mail.

If you are interested in meeting many popular science fiction authors and editors, seeing the real people behind the magazine you read, and mingling with other readers like yourself, and sharing opinions and experiences, you will like the Indian Lakes Conference. Why not come out and join us in the fun?

DROPPER

By Art Wesley

Whether the war is fought with spears or space-ships, the time finally comes for the mopping-up, and this has to be done by the Man With A Gun. In the 1900's it was the infantryman and the paratrooper; today it's the Dropper!

Illustrated by Lawrence

"THERE they go!" The Drop-bell had stopped clanging but the echoes were still chasing each other from wall to wall. Pilsudske stood on tiptoes, peering through the tinted quartz of the Drive-room viewpoint at the glinting swarm of capsules fading from sight below.

Triefuo was a mammoth tennis-ball beneath them, angry-brown and dark green. It swallowed the thousands of glistening motes, seining them in like minnows with its gravity.

"Rocks, they got!" snorted Mannheim, "Great big rocks that rattle when they nod their heads."

"It's a job that's not for me," agreed Grafton.

"What makes a guy get in that screwy outfit in the first place?" Mannheim asked. "There must be easier ways of committing suicide!"

"I'm damned if I know what makes a man team up with a bunch like that," Pilsudske said, still looking through the window. Half to himself, he added, "Maybe it's a chance to spit through the gates of Hell and stand there and watch it sizzle on the coals. Possibly the *Esprit de Corps* gets 'em — to work and train and fight beside a gang of mad hellions as daft as yourself. Could be, it's knowing that everyone shakes his head at

you when your back is turned and envies you for the guts they ain't got. Or maybe they just want to be heroes."

"Heroes-pheeroes!" Mannheim snorted derisively. "Medals will be a credit a carload when this thing is over and nobody will give a good-natured damn if you were a dropper or a clerk in some supply depot."

"You may be right," Pilsudske agreed, "but you mustn't forget that a man who has dropped is a hero to himself."

"If you're so steamed up on the idea, why don't you put in for Drop School and find out how much fun it is?" asked Mannheim. "Would you like to be making the fall with those boys right now?"

"Frankly — " Pilsudske took one last look at Triefuo's unsmiling face and turned away. " — No."

He picked up a geiger from one of the racks and walked away between the drive-piles, squinting thoughtfully at the gauges.

"You blubber-mouthed fool!" Grafton's whisper seethed with contempt. "You had to jab it in and break it off, didn't you?"

"What do you mean?" Mannheim asked, honestly puzzled, "What'd I say?"

"Didn't you know? No, I guess you didn't — Pilsudske chickened

out of Drop School — Voluntary GDO. *Now* do you know what you said?"

"Well for crissake! I didn't know —nobody ever told me. I just came aboard the last time the *Implacable* based. You know that!"

Mannheim started after the tall, stooped figure, busy with geiger and gauges.

"I'll go apologize."

Grafton caught his arm.

"Nope. Forget it. He'd a lot rather you didn't bring it up. He's pretty sensitive about it."

"I can imagine."

Combat Dropper/3rd Alan MacRaedie swallowed for the umpty-umpteenth time and fought down the urge to scream and batter his fists against the shiny plastic walls of his plunging cocoon. When the aneroid trigger let go, and only then, the halves of the shell would pop apart and the parachute would fill. There wasn't any way to open the shell a bit sooner, for a good reason.

A man dropping in a plastic egg from the belly of a SCPL — that's Space Craft, Personnel Landing — like roe from a spawning salmon, can wait just about so long and then claustrophobia sets in and he's *got* to get out.

Spaceships are too expensive to be exposed to the hazards of ground-fire. Therefore it becomes necessary to make Tactical Drops from several hundred miles above the planet's surface.

It takes quite a while before the shell falls far enough into the atmosphere to properly fill the chute A prematurely-opened canopy would hang limply about the jumper in the vacuum of space and would probably get so thoroughly fouled that it wouldn't open when air was finally reached.

There is, also, the matter of air to breathe. The shock of the opening parachute may disrupt the flow of oxygen. Treading close on the heels of such a mischance, anoxia — oxygen starvation — would ring down the curtain.

Anoxia is a pleasant way to go, but the taxpayers expect every man to do his duty and his duty is not to come down all flaccid and dead.

The logical solution, then, is to enclose the dropper in a little cartridge of tolerable environment for the trip through airless space. When the outside air gets thick enough, it swells a diaphragm inside the shell and trips the opening device, converting the dropper into a paratrooper.

Unfortunately a falling parachutist makes a splendid target for the gunner on the ground. Even with a low opening, there must be thousands of droppers so that some

will be left to hit dirt intact and come up slugging.

That's why it is vitally important for the SCPL to have access to reliable information about the barometric pressure in the drop area. Trigger the openings a few thousand feet too high and the ground defense has a field day. Release them a little bit too late and the droppers make a lot of holes in the ground but don't cause much strategic damage.

Back at Prime Base, parsecs to the rear, chop-jowled Marshals fingered rows of multi-colored ribbons, toyed absently with swagger sitcks, stood about the big tank in Grand Strategy and decided that Triefuo was a Critical Objective. Their aides, striding officiously back and forth wth aigullettes swinging, agreed with them.

Of course.

Today's history books agree with them too. If the dice of military fortune had fallen differently — if the Kagh fleet had been able to return to Triefuo in time to assist in its defense — then this would be written in Kimshur, if at all.

There probably wouldn't be much written material if the Kulgonian War had had a different ending. The Kagh are not — or *were* not — a race of bibliophiles.

So orders had flashed out over the InstaCom channels, encrypted in the tortuous "Supreme Secret" code. Without exception, they began: "You will proceed to Triefuo/Orrdu V with all possible dispatch. There, you will engage the enemy and subdue him at all costs. Repeat — AT ALL COSTS."

So the Bomb-Layers had shuttled between the doomed planet and the cargo-ships of the fleet until it became a milk-run and Triefuo was pocked with craters, almost edge-to-edge.

Then the Bruisers — the Gun Ships. Heavy — formed in Squadrons Echelon and screamed back and forth around the target from pole to pole. Their ventral batteries hammered the smoking ground with kalivite and tulium argate. They did a thorough job.

Even from beyond the atmosphere, Triefuo was taking on a rather shop-worn look.

But you can do just so much from above and then the time comes for the Man With A Gun. Somebody has to go down and eliminate the last of the enemy, hunting them from house to house, sniping, digging in, neutralizing an area so the big supply ships can land their loads of ammunition, rations and supplies.

Enter, then, the Dropper — the hell-for-leather battler, who plummets down to seize a planet with

sheer rawhide guts and a Montgomery Radiator, Mark VI.

Take another look at Alan MacRaedie, Combat Dropper/Third Class, intrepid warrior of Imperial Conquest, with nerves of drawn tungsten and entrails of chrome-molybdenum steel.

But look closely or you'll think he's a badly frightened youth of nineteen who would rather be a billion other places right now.

Scared? You bet your sweet bankroll he's scared! Nobody but a psychopathic case could help being scared. Heroes are a bunch of cowards that manage to fool everybody else.

Sometimes, they even fool themselves.

Alan's throat felt like dried beer on a marble-topped table. It was a sort of sticky ache and there was an ice-cold muskmelon where his solar plexus should have been. His intestines felt like a goat-skin bag full of brackish water — he could feel them gurgle when he moved. He felt an urgent need for a service the designers hadn't seen fit to provide in the shells.

He craned his neck for a look at Triefuo, swelling relentlessly below. By the curvature of the horizon, he judged that quite a bit of time remained. His mind went back to the final briefing before they had sealed for the drop.

Colonel Cramer had been there, tight-lipped, jaw muscles squirming like restless snakes as he stood beside the Captain, who was speaking:

" . . . and if any of you men still want to get out, even at this late moment, I want you to come forward and be excused. We want no man making the drop unless he is ready to go through with the action to the end. One craven can bolt and turn the tide of a whole battle. We want that man to bolt right now . . ."

Alan remembered the rustle of surprise when Cottrell, big Slim Cottrell, the loudest-talking, hardest - drinking, fiercest - fighting swashbuckler in the platoon had drifted silently out the door with the back of his neck burning brick-red. Of all the men in the bunch, Cottrell would have been picked last for such an act but, when the chips are down, you never can tell . . .

MacRaedie had wanted to follow Cottrell, had wanted to with all his soul. He'd sent a nervous impulse to his arm, commanding it to raise and offer his resignaton. But the fool arm had just twitched ever so slightly and refused to move.

Maybe it was the lop-sided grins on the faces of the other men as

they watched Cottrell make his exit. It may have been the Colonel's expression as his eyes roamed over the remaining men, seeming to linger a moment on each face and probe deep into the soul behind it.

Whatever it was, MacReadie had stuck it out and here he was, enmeshed in the clutch of Triefuo's gravity. And the choice was no longer his to make. There is no drive on a Drop-capsule.

And his throat still felt dry and sticky and raspy.

He swallowed again.

Far above and away, two men sat in the Strategic Meteorology room of the *Implacable*. Their eyes were glued to the dial of a telemetering barometer whose sensing mechanism was a thousand-odd miles below, at the point-of-drop on Triefuo.

"That seems like a hell of a lot of air-pressure for Triefuo." Rorrsbach ran nervous fingers through his tousled mop of taffy-colored hair. "I still say it shouldn't *be* that high!

"You want me to check with Fleet Stat for the range of pressures?" Kabaldt stubbed out his cigarette, barely-lit, and turned to the intercom.

"Do that, will you please?"

Kabaldt hunched over the vocatype and wormed a call through to the Statistics Section aboard the Flagship. A few seconds later, the mechanism whirred, thumped rapidly and issued a yellow message sheet. Kabaldt planked it down on the table between them and choked.

"Bert, you're right! The pressure gradient is given as 27.65 to 29.15 inches. That meter's off—'way off!"

Rorrsbach looked at the page where Kabaldt's finger pointed.

"Cripes, it *can't* be! I checked it over myself before we launched it!" He looked back to the dial of the telemeter, stoutly averring that the pressure at landing-point was 29.65 inches of mercury.

"There's only one way it figures, Pete." He swarmed to his feet and headed for the intercom. "The Kagh must have found that barometer and jimmied it up, somehow."

He keyed a button, frantically, fumbling over the code signal for "Command Bridge, Top Urgent."

"Bridge, here."

"Captain, there's something fritzed up with the telemetering barometer. I'm afraid we got a false reading. That means that the droppers will still be riding sealed when they hit. The triggers are set for 29.58 merc-inches and the highest reading on the books is 29.15. The whole goddam' fleet set their aneroids on the data from that 'meter and the whole blamed

drop is gonna dig dirt when they hit!"

The speaker was silent for a horror-stricken moment and then said "Stand by." and became silent.

Rorrsbauh looked at Kabaldt and shrugged, sickly.

.

The Captain looked at the Executive Officer.

The Exec looked at the Captain

They both looked at the pick-up screen of the electron-telescope where they could see the shells beginning to tumble gently as their vanes caught the first faint scattering of air.

"How in *Hell,*" moaned the Exec, "are we going to get them out, — Sir?"

"God only knows." said the Captain, "And I wish to hell He'd tell me!" Somehow, it didn't sound irreverent at the time.

Then the Quartermaster, a rating named Sanderson, made the suggestion that was to earn him the Galatic Cross.

"They got Montgomerys." he said, "Why can't they *shoot* their way out?"

"By all that's holy," cried the Captain, "you've hit it, man!"

He grabbed the mike for the Command Channel and began barking into it, words tuumbling out of his mouth like the capsules had tumbled from the Drop-bays a scant half-hour before.

MacRaedie wriggled in the tight confines of the capsule. He was cramped and his legs were going to sleep, despite the null-gravity of free-fall. He forced his legs to relax and tried to work a little circulation back into them.

There was hardly more space in the shell than in a moderately roomy coffin. He tried to put that thought out of his head. Fine thing to be thinking about at a time like this!

He thought of Lina—light-years away, but as close as the inside of his head. She was still going to school, but she'd spoken of joining the Auxiliaries in her last letter. Alan wished he could get at his wallet to take another look at her picture. But he could close his eyes and see her the way she had looked the night before the recruit ship had left the blue-and-green agate ball of Terra dwindling below.

"You're coming back, Al." She had said it fiercely. "I *know* you're coming back. And some day we'll look back to this night and laugh, together. Come back for me, Alan!"

And she had kissed him—all their kisses from the time they'd first met, distilled into one short embrace.

Then she had turned away and

walked up the path to the Dormitory. Slim, erect, not too fast, with the black moon-shadow of the trees flickering over her. True to her promise, she hadn't looked back. Alan had watched the door after it had closed behind her . . . watched it for a long moment, and then he'd settled the visor of his new uniform cap over his right eye and headed for the bus stop. He hadn't looked back either.

Somehow, it had seemed better that way.

He could remember the ride into town with his father—how they had both sat, trying to think of something to say, and how the few starts at talk had petered off into more silence. Then they had landed near the Recruiting Station and his father had looked into his eyes for a few seconds as they shook hands, turned and climbed back into the hauler and chugged off without a backward glance.

"We're a great bunch for not looking back, I guess." Alan twisted about for another look at Triefuo, now a huge disc below. "Shouldn't be long, now."

The speaker above his head startled him half out of his wits with its sudden intrusion on his thoughts.

"Attention, all Droppers! *Most Urgent!* Your triggers are improperly set. You must release yourselves. Keep calm, follow instructions carefully and everything will be all right. Draw your Montgomery and set it for 36.9 ambecs. When you get the signal, fire carefully to rupture the diaphragm on the aneroid over your head. Don't fire until you get the signal or you'll be a sitting duck for groundfire! Your Drop Leaders will give the signal. Stand By . . . "

Terror grabbed deep into MacRaedie's chest. He held his right elbow in, close to his ribs, and reached down to undo the flap of his holster. The catch seemed to be stuck—

He fumbled with it in a frenzy, expecting to hear the command to fire at any instant. He barked his knuckles on the metal of the oxygen regulator but he felt no pain. At last, he got the catch unfastened and his fingers settled over the cool checkering of the Montgomery's grip.

He yanked it out of the holster —seconds were precious now!

As the muzzle cleared the top of the holster, he crashed his elbow against the steel oxygen tank. His arm went dead and tingling to the shoulder.

And the Montgomery—the only thing in the universe that could get him out of the plastic shroud that whizzed him towards Triefuo

and a spattery end—dropped slowly down past his knees, impelled just a little faster than the dropping speed of the shell.

He made a scrabbling grab for it and only managed to smack his forehead on the hard crystal of the capsule wall.

He tried to scoop the gun back up with a toe, but he couldn't get it past the ledge at knee-level where the designers had put a storage-space for rations and spare ammo.

He tried to grasp it between his feet, but the calf-length boots with their thick soles were too clumsy and he couldn't bend his knees far enough. . . .

He tried to stoop, bending at all his joints, attempting to reach the elusive thing with tips of his fingers, but the harness of the chute held him up.

And he couldn't get at the release of the harness. If he *had*, he couldn't have gotten it back on in time to hold him when the shell opened up.

He tried—amazed that he still had a little time—to flip the cursed thing up with his toe . . . again and again. That d*amned* ammo cupboard!

"Droppers, hear this! This is Colonel Cramer. Make ready to open shells. Take careful aim at the rim of the diaphragm. Mind you don't nick the chute! You will fire at the count of one. Ready . . . five . . . "

One last flip with the toe.

No luck.

" . . . four . . . "

"Come back for me, Alan!"

"Take care of yourself, Son!"

" . . . three . . . "

He could see the brass disc of the aneroid about three feet above his head, a tube led in to it, admitting outside air to work against the delicate springs and levers of the triggering mechanism. It couldn't need much more pressure than it already had—something to toss at it—and quick! Quick!! *QUICK!!!*

He fumbled through the chest-pockets of his tunic like a madman. Whistle? No. No time to undo the chain

" . . . two . . . "

Cigarette case? No—too light and clumsy. Ah, spare charge for the Montgomery . . . heavy, compact—get the hand up—pretend you're shooting marbles—easy now . . . !

" . . . ONE . . . RELEASE!"

Steady, boy, your life is riding on this shot—NOW!

It's going to miss! Oh Christ—it can't!

It's hitting the chute post . . .

It's bouncing . . . it might . . . *might* . . .

It's hitting! It *HIT!*

WHAM!!

Sensation of leaping astride a horse's back from the top of a windmill . . . of splitting half-way to the neck.

And the scream of air—outside air—whistling past his ears, the unfamiliar smell of the air of Triefuo.

Oh, you beautiful, *beautiful* bumbershoot! The rest of the gang were a few hundred feet above. He'd be the first one down.

And no Montgomery. Before anything else, he'd have to lift a spare weapon off of some luckless devil who didn't land in one piece.

There wasn't a bit of doubt in his mind, now, that he'd be needing a gun himself. He knew that Lina had been right, that he'd see her again, someday.

Bring on those damned Kagh—here comes Lucky MacRaedie!

THE END

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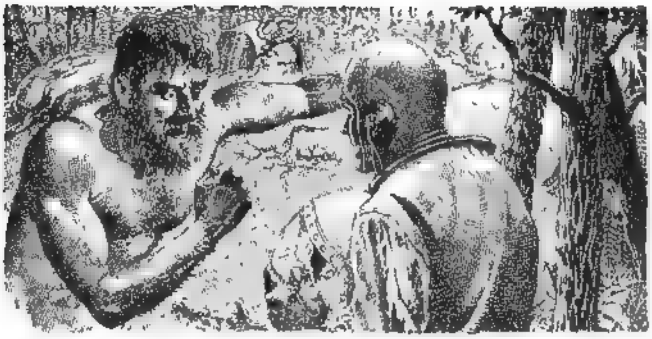


HOME IS WHERE THE WRECK IS

By Wilson Tucker

Whenever a problem came up, Captain Arthur Alger consulted the ship's manual. Unfortunately, it had no helpful hints on repairing a damaged spaceship without tools, on dealing with the planet's only inhabitant, or on understanding his fellow-castaway, the Lady Cynthia. Arthur was now on his own.

Illustrated by Lawrence

THE little ship rocketed along silently, violently, out of control and hopelessly lost. Its meager bulk was but a mote against the cold stars and it contained only two humans, both badly frightened despite their individual efforts to conceal it.

The ugly and unseen plunging rock, half the size of the ship itself, had sheared away most of the main drive tube and left the mixing and firing chambers a shambles. The deflection vanes had gone with the

tube of course and now the ship was little more than a plummeting derelict, pushed relentlessly on by the last application of power, pushed crazily into some new direction by the impact of the rock.

And the pilot-captain, stout lad, was being pushed to desperation by his one wailing passenger.

"But don't just stand there!" the Lady Cynthia Psmith complained. "Why don't you *do* something?"

"Would you suggest I get out and push, My Lady?" Captain Arthur Alger held his knotted fists behind him, the better to conceal his irritation with the woman. This was his first ship, his first command, and the prospect of it also being his last was disconcerting. He added, "Or should I put my head out the rear port and *blow?*"

"Really!" she replied coldly, "I thought the space service produced men."

Stung, Captain Alger drew himself up and almost reached the height of six feet, which included the officer's cap he wore at a jaunty angle. "My Lady, I'm doing the best I can under the circumstances. I've already consulted the ship's manual."

"And what does the ship's manual advise?"

Humbly, the Captain quoted, "Land on the nearest planet."

The disabled little ship careened along with no planet in sight — eye or radar sight. Previously it had been moving calmly enough from point *A* to point *B*, for no other reason than to please the whim and transport the daughter of some desk-ridden naval official. The young lady had vacated point *A* (her home world) and was journeying to point *B* (her father's base planet) because Papa had a birthday coming up and she thought it would be nice to drop in on Papa and give him a kiss as a birthday gift. Accordingly, orders were put through and Captain Alger and his first command were placed at her disposal. The ship and its two passengers left point *A* on schedule and and on pre-arranged line of flight, only to meet in mid-space an unsentimental chunk of rock which cared nothing for Papa's birthday.

"Well," the Lady Cynthia repeated herself, "I think you might do something. We just can't go on like this. What will people say?"

"And what would my Lady suggest?" Alger asked. He studied her, mentally frowining. Who would have dreamed that such a beautiful young thing could be so nasty? She had seemed such a lovely person when she boarded the ship — complimenting him, bestowing praises on the vessel's appointments. A very lovely young person. He had estimated her age at seventeen,

eighteen perhaps, and had graciously accepted her praise. But in the last few minutes — ! "You have a plan, perhaps?"

Lady Cynthia pointed a rigid, commanding finger toward the rear of the ship and a small door set into the wall. "I happen to know that is a tool locker. I would suggest you open it and obtain the proper tools."

Alger's eyebrows shot up. "What for?"

"To fix the trouble, of course!"

Saying nothing more, he obediently marched across the room and opened the locker. After some puzzled moments of staring into the locker's interior, he turned again and marched back across the room to retrieve the ship's manual from its resting place on the control board. While the girl impatiently watched him, Alger ran his eye down the alphabetical index to *Tools*, ascertained the proper page, and turned to it. He studied the list of tools and their accompanying illustrations which identified each one. And then he made a final trip across the room to stand before the locker.

"Well?" she asked.

"Two of these objects are screwdrivers," Alger said. "No mistaking that. But this other object — " He placed a finger on the page and peered into the locker.

"What is it?" the Lady Cynthia demanded.

"It seems to be a pair of pliers."

"And what else?"

"Nothing else. That's all."

"Nonsense! Every ship has a full complement of proper tools in its locker."

"This ship," Alger contradicted her with a small measure of satisfaction, "has a complement of two screwdrivers and a pair of pliers." He slammed shut the manual with finality. "I don't think I'll fix anything."

The desk-ridden official's daughter glared at him, her until-recently lovely face flaming with indignation. Mentally, Alger bade goodbye to his Captain's rating; at least he could say he had his stripes and his ship a few days. If they ever returned safely to a naval base the best he could expect would be some menial job on a freighter.

"I'm afraid our position is hopeless," he admitted.

"But I don't want to die!" his passenger wailed. "I am too young to die."

"I'm a man of twenty-two myself," the Captain said, "and I can't say as I do either."

"Can't you do *anything?*"

"Little or nothing, my Lady. Our driving power is gone, the ship is running away in whatever direction." And then he thought to add,

"There *is* a steering tube, forward."

"Well, fire it!" she demanded hopefully. "Why are you just standing there?"

Captain Alger cocked an eye at her. "A steering tube, my Lady, is for steering. It turns the ship thus and so, on a minute scale. I don't fancy living in a pinwheel."

"A pinwheel?"

"A pinwheel. Without our driving force as a balance, the forward tube — if fired — would start us spinning in a circle. We'd go around in a circle for the rest of our lives."

Lady Cynthia folded her arms, struggling to retain her young dignity in the face of rising hysteria. "You are certainly the most incompetent pilot I have ever known. My father shall hear of this!"

"No doubt," Alger replied dryly. "Following the instructions in the manual, I've already broadcast an *SOS* and explained our position. And I might add that this ship is equipped with the latest thing in communications — your father should receive my message in a week or ten days, if conditions are favorable."

"And he will launch a search-instantly!" she snapped.

"Instantly," he agreed. "In all directions."

The Lady Cynthia stepped back into her tiny private cabin and slammed the door. She opened it again to peep out at him. "What about the food supplies?"

"Edible," he retorted.

Captain Alger lounged on his crash-bed and studied the circle of light that represented a planet on the radar screen. The light had been an insignificant thing when he first discovered it nearly three weeks ago, but since that time he had watched it with growing fascination, watched it hold steady and slowly enlarge upon the screen. His quick calculations showed him the ship was heading for it, or very near it, and he felt confident he could employ the steering tube should they be in danger of passing it by. The circle of light was something to live for, something to dwell on.

The previous month of *nothingness* before the planet appeared had been a difficult time indeed; the Lady Cynthia had seen to that. For a month life aboard the ship had been an unpredictable, bitter-sweet thing. Depending upon her mood, the girl by turns had been the lovely person he first knew and then the hellion she later became. There had been some enchanting hours when they sat side by side on his crash-bed, timidly holding hands and talking of their homelands. She would tell him of the wonderfully

green world from whence she came, its lovely lakes and rolling seas, its tall mountains that seemed to reach the sky. She told him of the many pleasurable things to do there — dancing, riding, playing, living, and of her happy companions. And he in turn recounted his many experiences on a dozen planets of the space service, pointing up the strange faces those planets presented to the wanderer. They exchanged beautiful words, tender thoughts, delightful hours. Once she had cried a bit and rested her head on his shoulder. Hesitantly he put his arms around her for support and she had not objected.

And the next time she emerged from her room she had painfully kicked his shins and attempted to scratch his face when he called her, "My darling."

The chronometer spun on and he once marked off sxty-nine consecutive hours when she refused to speak a word; he prepared a pot of hot tea when she complained of feeling ill, and had it flung in his face. Extremely weary of eating one canned meal after another, he stayed away from the galley for two meal periods, only to be lured back to the table by the aroma of a tasty dish she cooked for him. Quite unpredictable, the Lady Cynthia Psmith.

The coming of the planet was a salvation.

For three weeks they had watched the circle of light, never once mentioning aloud the previous month howevermuch their thoughts may have dwelled on that period. And in those three weeks the atmosphere slowly reverted to what it once had been, back there in the beginning. He was Captain Alger and she was the Lady Cynthia. Alger grimaced at the thought. Perhaps she expected Papa to be awaiting her on that very planet, standing there with arms outstretched, an ambulance nearby, and a brass band in readiness.

He gave much thought to the matter of landing and finally realized there was little he could do about it. The landing would be in a strict sense of the term only: they would smack down. The steering rocket would be of some small use in an atmosphere and perhaps he could cushion the shock to some extent; other than that there would be nothing to do but radio the base to send a salvage ship. If there was a radio. If he stayed alive to operate it. If there remained anything to salvage.

He found a way to activate the steering rocket by remote control, by jamming the longer of the two screwdrivers into a a space behind the activating key. Lying on his crash-bed, he was just able to

reach out and grasp the handle of the screwdriver, to pull it toward him and depress the control. He made sure the Lady Cynthia was properly fastened into her bed, and when the time came and the planet's atmosphere began whistling about the outer hull, he lay down and grasped the screwdriver handle.

"All comfy in there, my Lady?"

"Go to hell!" was the un-ladylike answer.

"We may do just that," Alger murmured, and pulled on the handle.

He opened his eyes and saw his legs hanging above him. Instantly frightened by the implication he jerked the legs and was rewarded by having them tumble down on him, along with the remains of the crash-bed and miscellaneous debris that had been loose in the cabin. He had been resting on his back and shoulders with his feet in the air, and now his body ached desperately from the strained position. Crawling out from under the debris and the remains of the bed, he climbed awkwardly to his feet and winced at the shooting pains in his back and shoulders. The cabin was a wreck and he did not need an exterior inspection to know the ship would never fly again. He stood there, holding onto a projecting brace for support until his head should clear.

The control panel was smashed beyond recognition and a few of the piano-like keys lay scattered at his feet. The shiny brass chronometer was nowhere to be seen and the ship's log he had dutifully kept was split down its spine. The communications equipment — scattered and apparently stomped on by an enraged giant. He kicked at the screwdriver lying innocently on the floor. Moving toward the rear, he saw that the door to the tool locker was hanging wide and that the precious ship's manual had catapulted itself through the air and was now lying inside it. Alger seized the manual as the most valuable possession remaining to him, and attempted to open the inner airlock. It would not move beneath his questing fingers. Throwing his weight against it, he at last forced a narrow crack and then slowly worked the heavy panel back out of the way.

Daylight rushed in, daylight and the warm scented air of a pine forest.

Weakly, his stomach carrying just a hint of queasiness, he crossed the chamber on wobbly legs and sat down on the outer rim, marveling at the force of impact which had burst open that stout outer lock. There seemed to be birds

hidden somewhere in the forest. Alger sat there for a long moment gathering his wits about him and then he opened the manual, after first consulting the index.

Land on the nearest planet.

He had already done that.

Ascertain if the atmosphere is breathable.

Captain Alger looked up at the towering trees and the blue-tinted sky beyond, to reflect that he was breathing.

Ascertain if the natives (if any) are friendly.

Well, he could stroll down into the village later on and observe them. And there would be none of this sky-god business either; he wouldn't tolerate it.

Do not drink water until it has been tested.

Test or no test, the new world's water had better be fit to drink; their own supplies would not last much longer. The canned food of course was in greater supply but then the mere thought of canned food was nauseating.

Ascertain extent of damage and assign crew to reconstruction.

With two screwdrivers and a pair of pliers, Alger thought bitterly. A pity the manual didn't contain —

A hoarse, angry male voice cut across his thoughts. "By thunder! Do you always make sloppy landings like that? You've certainly raised the devil around here!"

Startled out of his wits, Alger leaped from the rim of the lock and landed on the grassy earth, tightly clutching the manual in his hand. Natives! He peered shakily around — and saw the old man standing among the trees. A tall, naked old man who seemed to blend with his surroundings, an old fellow with tangled hair and long matted beard. The stranger was shaking a clenched fist. Alger hastily noted that the fist did not contain a spear or other weapon.

"Hello . . . " he called out. "Me come from sky."

"I'm not blind, you idiot." The native seemed a trifle angry."

Alger stepped away from the ship and held out his hands in the universal gesture. "Are you friendly?"

"Friendly!" the oldster roared at him. "After what you've done to my trees? just look yonder — " He turned and pointed away from the ship, toward the direction it had come. The crashing hulk had left a swath almost a mile long through the forest; it had pancaked down onto a growth of trees, sank through to the ground and then careened along for many thousands of feet. A toothpick manufacturer would have easy pickings following that swath. "Best stand of timber I've seen in years," the

native declared. "Ruined!"

"I'm sorry," Captain Alger apologized. "I was flying blind."

"You were flying drunk!"

"Sir, I do not drink on duty. My ship was out of control and the landing was a necessity. Are you a native?"

"What do I look like?" the old fellow snarled.

"A native."

"Well then, I am. I live here, if that's what you mean." The stranger moved nearer the ship and paused to inspect the wreckage. Alger saw that the fellow seemed healthy enough despite his native state: he was old but not senile, naked but not savage, and the man's skin was much like his own — but deeply tanned of course from the mode of living.

"I notice you speak my language," he said politely.

"Do you own it?" The old man finished with his inspection of the hulk and turned to the pilot, taking in the remains of the once-trim uniform. "I speak many languages. What are you made up for — a masquerade?"

"Sir," Alger informed him stiffly, "this is the uniform of the space service. May I inquire your name? What do the tribesmen call you?"

The oldster peered at him. "What tribesmen?"

"Well — the other natives here. Your fellows."

"I'm the only native here." He moved closer to Alger and suspicious sniffed his breath.

"You mean — you're all alone on this world?"

"Except for you, dammit all, yes. Anything wrong with that?"

"No sir, of course not. I'm only trying to ascertain my surroundings. I must determine if the air is fit to breathe, if the natives are friendly, and if the water is drinkable. Is it?"

"What the devil do you think I've been drinking all these years, huckleberry juice?"

The Captain wisely held his silence.

The native flicked a contemptuous finger at the ship. "That'll never fly again."

"No sir. I'm afraid not."

"Well then," the old man continued, pointing now to his tattered uniform, "you might as well throw those rags away. Won't do you much good here."

"Remove my clothing?" Alger was astounded and not a little shocked at the barbarous suggestion. "Ridiculous! I have a lady aboard."

He wasn't quite prepared for what followed.

"*Women?*" the old man leaped high into the air and screamed with all the power of his lungs.

The woodland birds fell silent at the scream, frightened. At the very pinnacle of his leap, the fellow seemed to clack his heels together. *"Women — whee!"* He came to earth again and scrambled for the airlock.

"Stop!" Alger commanded, drawing himself up before the lock. "The Lady Cyn — " He was rudely knocked aside, and the native vanished inside the lock.

Alger picked himself up off the ground, surprised at the old man's unexpected strength. The native water must be indeed drinkable. He shook his head to clear it, and hastily followed the old one into the ship. The Lady Cynthia would never forgive him if he allowed harm to come to her; her father would not only strip him of rank, he'd — Alger stopped, just outside the Lady Cynthia's cabin door. The door was open and the surprising sound that had stopped him in his tracks was a delightful feminine squeal.

"By thunder!" the native declared.

"Why — grandpappy!" the Lady Cynthia exclaimed.

The two children of civilization lived in the ship for the most part, for Captain Alger was totally unable to follow the manual in the construction of shelters for the crew in event of a demolished vessel. He consoled himself with the thought that shelters couldn't be built anyway — not with the three minor tools at their disposal. Some one at the base would answer for that oversight! So they slept in the ship and alternately ate there, or outside, depending on the weather and the old native.

Sometimes the man would supply them with small game freshly caught, and he attempted to teach them the art of skinning and cooking the animals — without much appreciation. The girl would run into the ship until the operation was over while Alger, stout heart, watched for all of two or three seconds before seeking the night sky. The old one would build a small fire in a clearing near the wreck and cook the meal. Alger and the Lady Cynthia had no compunctions about eating the animals.

Meanwhile, Alger was building some high suspicions of the old devil.

"My Lady," he whispered in a conspiritorial manner, "ssssst, my Lady."

"What do you want?"

Alger sidled near her, watching the native on the other side of the fire. "My Lady, doesn't he somehow seem familiar?"

"Who? Grandpappy?"

"Yes, my Lady. Don't you have

the impression you've seen him somewhere before?"

"Nonsense. I never saw him before in my life." She beamed across the fire. "But I think he's a sweet old duffer."

"I'm positive I've seen that face before! Perhaps in an old picture . . . " Alger continued eating and watching. Somewhere, sometime, he was almost positive he had seen a likeliness of that man. If only he could plant a firm finger on the elusive similarity and then positively identify the two images. "He might at least wear clothing in your presence," Alger said lamely.

"Nonsense," the Lady Cynthia said again. "If our rescue ship doesn't arrive soon, I'm thinking of discarding mine."

"My Lady!" Alger said, aghast. "What will people think?"

"What people?" she asked him. "Grandpappy seems to get along very well."

The rescue ship, if there was to be one, did not come soon and very slowly the young couple cast off a few of the simpler trappings of civilization, to adopt some of the manners and ways of the old native. That venerable one, for some mysterious reason of his own, always seemed to be laughing at them. Or at least, he seemed to be laughing at Alger. The expression in his eyes when he studied Cynthia was not laughter. Cynthia would occasionally catch him at it, and shake a wagging finger. "Now, Grandpappy!"

There came a day when the Lady Cynthia would no longer allow Captain Alger near her, either at the fireside meals or in the ship or the woods during the day. Alger noted this after some time and wondered about it. What she actually preferring the old man to him? Could she seriously be thinking of going native?

The native relieved his mind and his doubts.

"Tomorrow morning," the old one said, addressing himself to the girl, "we're taking a little trip. Pack a supply of grub and set off yonder." He pointed away through the forest, and then commenced the business of smothering the fire with dirt.

"Really," Alger said instantly, aware of his responsibilities, "I must stay near my ship."

"You stink," the oldster said. Cynthia tittered.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I said you stink. You and your rags." He tramped down the dirt above the remaining ashes of the fire. "The ship won't fly away. Tomorrow we pack some grub and go over to the lake."

"The . . . lake?" Alger said

hesitantly. Instantly into his mind sprang the image he was trying to identify.

"It's about two days — yonder. Do you a world of good." The girl laughed again and the old man turned on her. "You too, sis."

"All right, grandpappy."

Against his will and his better judgement, Captain Alger shouldered his share of the load the next morning and set off after Lady Cynthia and the native. A turmoil boiled up within him and he was unable to control the nervousness reflected in his hands; he was glad the other two were ahead of him and could not see his agitation. This was it! The period of waiting was over, the weighing had been done and now they were being led off to the lake like sheep. Belatedly, he realized that his dear sweet old mother had been right all along; he should have listened to her warnings. Again and again she had cautioned him to always follow the right path and to avoid the sinful ways of his father, lest a similar fate overtake him.

And now look — here he was. This one old man all alone on the strange world, an old man whose face was oddly familiar. And now he was being led to the lake.

He had paid his mother little heed at the time, giving her only the perfunctory assurances that he would take care of himself, that he would not consort with evil companions, that his thoughts and intentions would forever remain pure and honest. All for naught. He was trapped, the Lady Cynthia (dear, sweet innocent girl) was trapped, and there was no escape. The old one had them. Since the early suspicions had grown in his mind, since those few abortive attempts to persuade the girl to recognize the native, he had said nothing more. Poor girl, she did not recognize the true state of affairs. She still believed their ship had crashed on some mortal planet, still believed that some day soon a rescue vessel would come plunging down from space.

On the afternoon of the second day they reached the lake. He knew they were there because he heard the girl shout, ahead of him, and the old one shouted a reply. Alger trudged on and as he came to the edge of the trees, dropped the pack to the ground and shut his eyes. Slowly, feeling his way, he sensed the ground sloping away beneath his feet and presently the grassy soil gave way to sand. He stopped.

"Come on, Captain!" Cynthia shouted.

He stubbornly shook his head, rooted to the spot and eyes still tightly closed. Fear and a fading

bravado held him there. This was the end!!

"Git in here," the old man shouted up at him. "You ain't fit to live with!"

Alger refused to move, until at last the angry old fellow came up the beach and roughly seized his arm. With a complete lack of dignity, the young man was hauled across the sand by a brute force he could not resist, and flung bodily into the lake. He felt himself falling.

"Geronimo!" he shouted his last defiance.

He fell face-first into the lake and then the old man planted a rude foot in the middle of his back to hold him there. Alger struggled valiantly in the shallow water, determined not to sink without a struggle. The cold water stung his eyelids and when he opened his mouth the liquid rushed in. He spat it out again, fuming, and tried to roll from under the old one's foot. Suddenly he ceased fighting. The water was shivery cold!

"Water!" Alger twisted away and sat up, opening his eyes in astonishment. He dug his fingers into the lake bed and held them up before his eyes, watching the mud and water trickle away. "This is water," he exclaimed.

"What the devil did you expect," the native barked, "fire and brimstone?"

"Water," Alger repeated foolishly, delighted with the feel of it on his body. "Water, water, water, water . . . " The old native stalked away in disgust.

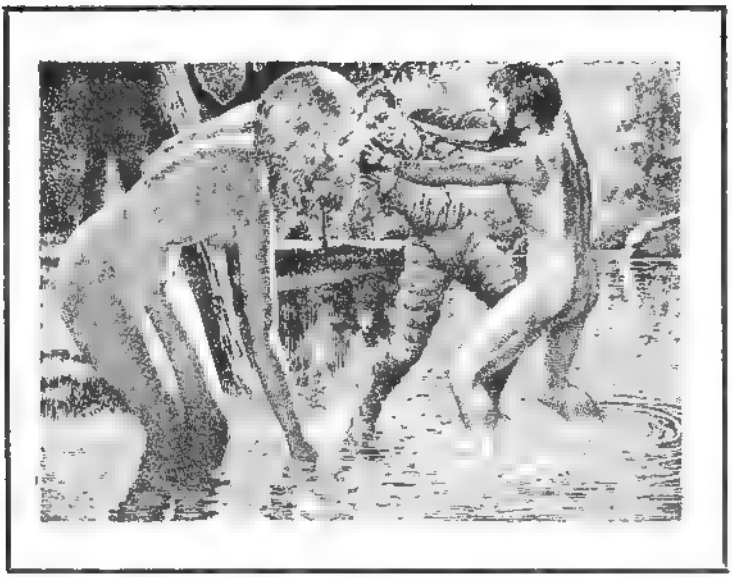
•

Captain Alger clung to his dignity. He continued to wear his trousers and his officers cap after the girl had shed her garments in the lake. To be sure, the trousers were no longer complete and his rather knobby knees protruded, but they were the only pair of trousers in the new world and he intended to cling to them. And of course the officer's cap was crushed out of shape but it still denoted his captaincy. As for the Lady Cynthia—well, she was quite beautiful, really, but shameless nevertheless. She and that old man carried on as though nothing were changed.

The evening on the lake was chilly and a larger fire than usual had been built. The girl, unusued to her new raiment — or lack of it, huddled close. Alger caught the old man studying her closely. He moved protectively nearer the innocent miss. She glanced at him but said nothing.

After a while the native asked casually, "Does he know?"

Cynthia shook her head. "No. Not even tonight."



"Dumb cluck," the old man said.

"Very," Cynthia agreed.

Alger had the distinct impression they were speaking of him. He cleared his throat. "Nice evening."

They did not answer but simply stared at him.

"They sure raise 'em green anymore," the fellow said after a while. "Not like when I was a boy."

"How did you find your way here?" Cynthia wanted to know.

The native chuckled. "I didn't. I was dumped here."

"Do you mean deliberately abandoned?"

"Yep. The captain caught me fooling around with the captain's wife. Couldn't shoot me; that was illegal. So he dumped me on this world with a gun and some food. I been here ever since."

"How dreadful!" Has it been long?"

"Twenty years or more, I guess. I got used to it." He grinned wickedly at her. "A woman sure looks good after twenty years or so."

"Thank you," Cynthia dimpled. "I like you, grandpappy."

Alger cleared his throat once more. "Do you think a rescue ship will come soon?"

Grandpappy studied him. "Ain't been a ship here since the one that left me."

"No ship in twenty years? That's incredible!"

"That's truth," the oldster contradicted.

"Oh, my," Alger said weakly.

"Guess you better wise up, son."

"But — we may be marooned here for years!"

"For the rest of your life, more likely." Again he glanced at the waiting girl. "Who's it going to be, me or you?"

"What?" Alger asked.

"Marry her, you oaf!"

"Marry Lady Cynthia?" Alger showed his new astonishment. "Why, I hadn't thought of such a thing." He looked around almost bashfully.

"You'd better. Or I'm going to."

"Why?" the Captain asked.

Grandpappy seemed pained.

"You see?" Cynthia exclaimed. "I've often wondered how he became a space pilot."

Grandpappy said slowly as if explaining to a child, "In her condition she needs a husband.

Alger examined the girl, fighting away his bashfulness. He looked approvingly on the strong arm and leg muscles, on the well developed body.

"Why? She looks healthy enough to me."

The old man screamed, "By thunder!" He arose and walked away, to rummage impatiently through the pack Alger had carried. "You got that ship's manual here?"

"Yes sir. Why do you need that?"

"Because the marriage ceremony is in it, you dunce. Ah—here it is." He brought out the book and carried it over to the firelight, to sink down and riffle the pages. In a few moments he found what he was searching for. "Thought it was in here. Knew it used to be." He glanced at the girl. "What's your name?"

"Psmith. Lady Cynthia Psmith."

"Knew a man by that name once." Grandpappy nodded. "Good name. What's yours, son?"

"Captain Arthur Alger."

The old man stared at him. "What?"

"Captain Arthur Alger."

"Where'd you get that name?"

"That was my father's name. He was shipwrecked." He looked up to find the native examining him curiously. "What's the matter?"

"How's your mother?" the old man wanted to know.

"Well — quite well, thank you. Why do you ask?"

After a small silence the oldster said, "Nevermind. You ready to marry this girl?"

"Well, if you say so."

"I sure as hell *do* say so. Hold her hand."

Grinning like a foolish ass, Alger reached out to touch Cynthia's hand. She looked at him for a moment of exasperation and then grabbed his with a tight grip.

"Go ahead, grandpappy."

Grandpappy did, with a curious mist to his eyes.

Unable to sleep, seething with the excitement of his sudden wedding, Captain Arthur Alger paced the lake shore and blissfully counted the stars. His wedding night! Little had he dreamed *this* might happen, on that long-ago day the beautiful young girl stepped into his ship enroute to visit her father. What an incredible chain of events had happened to him! He had been given his first command, he had lost that first command when sudden tragedy struck, he had by the sheerest nerve and most desperate cunning saved the ship and their lives on landing, they had had the good fortune to crash on a hospitable world, a kindly native had been there to guide their faltering footsteps, and now he was unexpectedly married to the loveliest creature in the galaxy! She had chosen him, of all men. It was like a dream and he wondered what he had done to deserve it.

He turned about for the return trip and found the old man approaching him.

"A nice evening, sir."

"What you doing down here, son? Ought to be up there with your bride."

"I'm too excited to sleep, sir."

"By thunder! They sure grow 'em dumb these days." He touched Alger's arm, stopped him. "Don't you know who I am? Look me in the face."

The Captain stared long at the man. "Well, sir, you *do* look familiar. I've been trying to place you ever since we landed here. I thought — I thought — "

"Never mind what you thought — I've just about lost faith in your thinking processes. Use your memory. Seen my picture around anywhere?"

"Your picture?" Alger suddenly shouted, "Why — yes! Yes, of course. Your picture! Now I know where I had seen your face before. Your picture is . . . is . . . "

"Is where?"

" . . . Is on mother's vanity, at home! Why, sir, that makes you my — "

"Of course, of course you dope." The old man laughed gleefully. "And the girl calls me grandpappy. Get it?" He nudged the Captain's ribs.

"Uh . . . no sir."

A suddenly sad expression replaced the gleeful laughter on the old man's face. He shook his head, and said something into Alger's

ear.

Alger stared at him. *"What?"*

Grandpappy nodded, beaming.

"How do you know?" the Captain demanded.

Grandpappy tightened his lips in a thin determined line and turned on his heel without a further word. Alger watched him go, puzzled at his new-found father's behavior. A dazzling thought struck him and he whirled to stare at the girl reclining by the fire. He broke into a run.

Cynthia saw him coming. She had followed his pacing to and fro on the shore, had watched grandpappy intercept and speak to him, had guessed at the tenor of their words. When the old man leaned forward to whisper a secret, when her new husband had cried his amazement to the night, she was serenely happy. Now he knew. She could forgive his long ignorance, forgive the sometimes unhappy weeks cooped up together in a runaway space ship, forgive his fumbling. At last he knew. He was coming now, running to her with the sure knowledge. Cynthia sat up in the flickering firelight and held out inviting arms to him.

Captain Alger sped by her without a word, throwing up sand in her face. He ran breathlessly to his pack and dipped into it, to haul out the battered old ship's manual. Feverishly, he spun the pages.

Cynthia hurled a chunk of firewood at his head.

THE END

". . . and there, ladies and gentlemen, goes the first rocketship to the moon!"

Carmody had a glamour job — piloting a rocket ship — but even the most glamourous job eventually becomes routine and somewhat monotonous, and the really exciting part of a trip is the

HOMECOMING

By E. C. Tubb

Illustrated By Lawrence

HE had bought it on Venus; a little thing, carved from exotic woods and oramented with plumes and tufts of brilliantly coloured feathers. The eyes were tiny gems, the arms and legs cunningly jointed, and the face had a peculiar, lopsided grin as if the maker had impressed some of his own humour into the inert material. It looked a little like a distorted mannikin, a caricature of a man, a three-dimensional cartoon, and it had the unmistakable stamp of primitive art.

It was a doll.

John Carmody looked at it as it sat propped against the metal of a bulkhead, the light reflecting in tiny glitters from its eyes, and wondered again whether or not he was doing the right thing. It didn't weigh much of course, only half a kilo, but even that was something to be considered when the load was calculated by the gram.

He shrugged. It was too late to worry about it now. They had already landed and soon he would have to pass the inspection shed. Memory of the inspectors gripped his stomach with sudden doubt, the regulations were strict, too strict, and no excuse could mitigate the crime of smuggling excess weight aboard the rocket ship. Maybe he shouldn't have bought it. Dolls were to be had by the million here on Earth, ordinary dolls made of sterile plastic and smoothly fashioned limbs. Dolls that wore clothes, cried, closed their eyes, had real hair and proportionate bodies. Dolls which could walk, talk, even

dolls which wet themselves and had to be changed just like a real baby. But this doll was special.

This was for his own child.

Carefully he slipped the doll beneath his tunic, patting at the bulge and glad that the thin garment hung loosely on his shoulders and chest. Footsteps clattered on the metal of the stairs and a man called to him as he passed.

"Coming, John?"

"I'm right with you." He patted at the bulge again then swung from the compartment and climbed up towards the nose of the ship.

As usual he was the last. He hesitated at the open port, letting his eyes drift over the expanse of the landing field, staring at the crowd clustered around the high wire fence, trying to recognise one face from hundreds, turned, like

pale white blobs, towards the soaring perfection of the slender rocket ship.

He frowned, then smiled with relieved understanding. Of course Norma couldn't have come to meet him, not with a young baby to look after, but despite his own logic a chill finger of worry touched his heart.

Surely she could have brought the baby with her?

Or perhaps the baby was ill!

The metal rungs of the built-in ladder stretching from nose to base of fin almost seared his hands from the speed of his too-rapid descent. The ground slammed against the soles of his shoes, jarring him, and reminding him with the unyielding impact that he was no longer in free fall. He staggered a little, then forced his quivering legs to carry him at a half-run towards the squat bulk of the administration buildings hunched next to the gate in the high wire fence.

A hand caught at him, slowing him to an abrupt halt.

'Steady, John, you want to strain your muscles?" The engineer grinned at him, still gripping his arm and forcing him to walk slowly and steadily across the seared dirt. "You can't run like that just after landing, not after three months in free fall you can't, you'll wind up with twisted tendons, strained cartilages, and your muscles will be so sore that you won't be able to move for days."

"I know that, Lance, but I'm worried. Norma isn't here."

"So what? Maybe she's waiting in the car, or at home, or anything. Maybe she's left a message. Quit worrying."

Lance grinned at the pilot and waved to the watching crowds. "You'd think that people would get tired of watching take-offs and landings. After all what is it, just a giant rocket going up, see one and you've seen 'em all. Me, I'd rather have a nice beer."

John grunted, still examining the crowd with eager eyes, still hoping. He couldn't see her, and worry grew within him like a searing ball of stomach-knotting fire. Eagerly he stumbled up to the message clerk, snapping his fingers to attract the man's attention.

"Carmody. John Carmody. Have you a message for me?"

"Carmody?" The man frowned, then shook his head. "No, sir. No message."

"Are you certain?" John swallowed, the worry growing within him. "Check again will you it's rather important."

"Yes, sir." The clerk riffled the message slips with practised ease, and watching him, John knew that

he was wasting the man's time.

There was no message.

The formalities were few and quickly over. He stepped on the scale, hoping that he had fasted enough to lower his weight the necessary half kilo, and then stepped into the shower room. He hid the doll while he showered and then tried to hide it beneath his street clothes. It made an awkward bundle, and after a while he held it openly in his hand, too worried to care what the inspectors would think about it. He signed for his personal papers, useless in space, but essential here, and received keys, wallet, and money.

One of the inspectors touched his arm just as he was stowing away the remainder of his gear.

"What's that under your arm, Carmody?"

"A doll. Why?"

"Imported?

"Yes. I got it on Venus, we had a short load and I fasted to bring my weight down. He stared up at the man. "Anything wrong in that?"

"There could be." The man took the little thing, examining it with a critical eye, testing it for hollowness and brushing his finger across the tufted feathers. "You know better than to try smuggling, Carmody. How long have you been a pilot?"

"Five years, and I was an engineer before that."

"Then why do it?"

John shrugged, knowing that the inspector was right in what he said, and yet somehow, just not caring.

"I got it for my baby," he said bitterly. "A toy, nothing more than that, and yet you try to make a crime out of it."

"It is a crime," reminded the inspector quietly. "You know the weight limitations. This thing weighs what? Half a kilo? That could take a lot of fuel to lift and set down again."

"I told you that I'd fasted, my max weight's the same as when I left Earth, you don't have to tell me about weight restrictions."

He stared up at the inspector, half-defiant, half-apologetic, knowing that he had done wrong and yet hoping to get away with it.

"What are you going to do about it?"

"I should report it," said the man slowly. He stared down at the little doll, turning it over in his hands, smiling a little at the humorous expression on the carved face. "You say you got this for your baby?"

"Yes."

"Good for you. Boy or girl?"

"I don't know yet. It was born

about three months ago, while I was on Venus, that's what made me get the doll." He swallowed and glanced at his wrist watch. It had stopped, unwound for nine months, and he unstrapped it, his fingers twirling the spindle as he stared at the big clock against the wall.

"Look, I'd like to get away as soon as possible. My wife isn't here and I'm worried about her. What are you going to do about the toy?"

The man hesitated, then thrust the doll towards Carmody, his eyes flickering as they glanced around the big room.

"Take it. Take it and forget that I ever saw it, it's both our jobs if you don't." He smiled at the relieved expression on the pilot's face. "I've got three kids of my own and I know just how you feel. But make this the last time eh?"

"Sure," promised John gratefully. He tucked the doll beneath his arm, strapped the adjusted wrist watch on his arm, and sweeping up the rest of his belongings almost ran from the building.

Outside the crowds had thinned to a scattering of people still watching the silent shape of the rocket ship. A party of schoolboys clung to the wire, their shrill voices sounding like a flock of disturbed crows as they made rash promises as to what they would be when they grew up. Several couples strolled arm in arm, their eyes soft as they whispered promises which were as old as time itself, and blithely ignored the apparent reason for their presence at the landing field.

A bus, heavily loaded with sightseers, jerked from the parking ground with a whine from its turbine, and several small, beetle shaped family cars, joined the procession heading back to the city. In a few minutes the parking area had cleared, and aside from a few couples, the crowd had gone—but he still hadn't found his wife.

He leaned against the side of a public videophone booth, his breath rasping through his throat and sweat trickling in uncomfortable warm stickiness down his face and neck. His leg muscles jumped and quivered with unaccustomed strain and his heart thudded painfully against his ribs. He was being a fool and he knew it. After three months in free fall he should have taken things easy, let himself get used to the drag of restored weight, given his heart and muscles a chance to adapt to the extra strain.

Instead of that he had raced around the parking area, staring into cars and searching the faces of complete strangers, running from one group to another and forcing himself between men and women

who had stared at him, then shrugged, then laughed.

After a while he straightened from the side of the booth, then, fumbling for coins, jerked open the door and reached for the transceiver. His fingers felt stiff and awkward as he dialed the familiar number and he waited, the receiver against his ear, and a growing sickness welling inside of him.

There was no reply from the house.

He stood, listening to the interrupted droning of the attention signal, his mind a racing whirl of speculation and surmise. She could have gone shopping, had an accident with the car, become stranded away from a videophone. She could have had an accident and be lying now in some hospital. The baby could be ill, dangerously ill, and she had forgotten to send a message. She . . .

Slowly he replaced the handset.

Clumsily he dialed a second number, his fingers shaking as he tried to thrust them into the correct holes, the coins spilling from his hand as he fumbled them into the slots. The drone of the attention signal echoed from the earpiece, then . . .

"Larrimer here. Yes?"

"Bill," John whispered. "John here, John Carmody."

"John!" The voice lost it's casual indifference. "How are you? Just arrived?"

"Yes."

"Good for you, have a nice trip?"

"As usual. Bill, is Norma with you?"

"Norma?" The voice changed, seemed to shield itself with a veil of caution. "Why no, John. Isn't she at home?"

"No. I've 'phoned there, and she isn't at the field either, I'd hoped that she might be with you."

"No, John, we haven't seen her for quite a while now." The voice altered again, became charged with a false cheerfulness. "She is probably on her way home, John, you know how women are, no idea of time at all."

"You think so?"

"I'm sure of it, John. Why don't you get home, surprise her, I bet that she's even forgotten what date it is."

"Thanks, Bill, I'll do that." He hestated, not liking to appear too worried, and yet eager for news. "Bill."

"Yes?"

"What was it, Bill? Boy or Girl?"

Silence. Silence and the steady hum of the connection. John thought he heard a swift mutter of conversation, muffled as though someone had pressed a hand over the mouthpiece. He frowned, annoyed with himself that he hadn't

made full sound-screen contact, but it hadn't seemed necessary and he wasn't used to the videophone.

"Bill! Are you there, Bill?"

"Sorry, John," said the voice apologetically, "something's just come up. Call me later eh?"

"But the baby?" The click of the broken connection sounded strangely loud and for a moment he stared at the blank screen of the videophone, tempted to make full visual contact and repeat his question. Someone rapped impatiently on the door of the booth, a pudgy faced matron with hard snapping eyes and a ridiculous hat perched on an elaborate coiffure. He ignored her, dialing his own home again, and listening with mounting desperation to the steady mechanical drone of the signal.

The matron rapped again, her thin lips pursed into a tight crease and her hard eyes narrowed wth arrogant rage. She rapped, the thick gold of her rings almost threatening to break the glass of the door, then jerked open the panel.

"Young man," she snapped. "Isn't it about time you let someone else use the phone?"

Slowly he replaced the handset, his mouth dry with worry and irritation. He stared at her, at her smug arrogance, her ridiculous hat and her heavy rings. He stared at her, and something in his expression made her release the door and take a step backwards away from the booth.

He brushed past her, not really seeing her, not seeing anything, his mind twisted with worry and doubt.

He had to get home.

A turbo cab took him to the city, and there he managed to hire a heliocab to take him the fifty miles to his home. There were cheaper ways of travel, he could have waited for the monorail or the passenger bus, but impatience gnawed him and any inaction was more than he could tolerate.

He sat hunched in the tiny cab, the wheel of the rotating vanes a shimmering blur above his head, and stared down at the streaming green-brown-grey of the landscape below. It was getting dark, the sun rested on the horizon, a flaming ball of red and gold, tinting the clouds with fingers of aureate splendour, washing the pale blue of the heavens with a film of orange brilliance and touching the drab reality of the world with sheer magic.

It was a perfect evening, and if only Norma had met him, it would have been a wonderful experience. She could have brought the baby, and he would have played with it during the long drive home. She would have driven of course, she

always did, and they would have talked of all the little things which had happened during the past nine months.

Trifling things, how the baby had looked when born, what it had weighed, what the doctors had said and the nurse and all their friends. They would have argued about names and schools and professions. They would have discussed toys and diets and modern methods of rearing. They would have resumed the close intimacy a man should have with his wife, and the roads would have spun beneath the wheels, the night would have closed around them, and the long, lonely months in space would have vanished like an unpleasant dream.

If she had met him.

He frowned at the sharp stab of worry and doubt. What had kept her? Why couldn't she have left a message, a word, something? Space ships were regular if nothing else, they stuck to a rigid schedule, they had to, and aside from at the most an hour each way, they were always on time. What wife could forget the date of her husband's arrival?

Other wives met the rocket ships. Sweethearts, relatives, sisters and brothers, mothers and children, strangers and sightseers. They always met the ships, staring with wondering eyes as the slender pillar of smooth metal descended on a thundering pencil of flame. Why not Norma? He shifted on his seat, trying desperately to quell the worry within him, trying to justify the unjustifiable.

Norma would have the worry of a new-born baby. A tiny mite, demanding full attention and utmost care. His features softened as he thought of it, losing some of their hard tension, the muscles relaxing into something like a smile. Norma had wanted a child so much. She had been desperate for a baby of her own, the mother-hunger burning within her had shone nakedly from her eyes whenever she had seen a friend with a baby, and she had waited so long.

He frowned again, remembering the conversation with Larrimer, he still didn't know whether it was a boy or a girl. He felt the bulk of the doll on the seat beside him, and smiled at the oddly humorous expression on the carved wooden face. It would be a girl he decided. A girl with all her mothers' beauty, her mothers' thick black hair, her mothers' wide brown eyes. A little girl, plump, with chubby limbs and fat little hands. She would play with the Venusian doll, the only little girl on Earth to have such a toy, and later, when she was big, they would talk together and he would tell her of all the strange

and distant places to be found among the glowing stars.

The heliocab tilted a little, the spinning vanes slowing as it slanted to lose altitude, then hovered, the vanes whirling in a shimmer of glory as the blades caught and reflected the light from the setting sun. A light flared from the control tower of the public landing strip, then, softly as a piece of thistledown, the heliocab descended to the wide ribbon of concrete below.

John had left the tiny cabin almost before the cab had stopped. He thrust money at the pilot, then turned and almost ran towards the exit, his legs pounding at the concrete and his breath rasping through his nose.

"Hey!"

John didn't stop.

"Hey you there, don't you want this?"

The pilot leaned half-out of his cabin, a little thing in his hand, a thing of carved wood and brilliant feathers. He waved it at John, a smile creasing the corners of his mouth. "You forgot this, don't you want it?"

"Thanks." John ran back to the helicab and took the doll. "Thanks a lot."

"Forget it." The pilot stared at him. "You feel all right?"

"Yes."

"You don't look it."

"I'm all right," snapped John impatiently, then was ashamed of his too-sharp tone. "Being overdoing things a bit," he explained weakly. "A good night's rest will fix me up. Thanks again."

"That's O.K. I've got kids of my own." The pilot grinned, waved a casual salute, then lifted his cab on whirling blades and headed towards the parking area. John tucked the doll firmly beneath his arm and forced himself to walk towards the exit. His head ached and he felt the protest of overstrained muscles. His joints burned and his skin felt dry and hot as though from incipient fever, and he knew that he had to use caution or be laid up with strained ligaments.

He took a turbine cab home.

The house was in darkness, the dying light of the ending day reflecting from the blank windows in showers of red and gold, crimson and orange, giving a deceptive air of gaiety to the silent dwelling. He thumbed the doorbell, then, realizing that no one could be at home, tried the door. It opened, and his nose wrinkled at a musty odour, a smell of stale air and stale smoke, of dust and the lingering traces of rotting food. Alarm stabbed at him, and he thrust the door

wide, switching on the hall lights, and calling a familiar name.

"Norma."

Silence, and the ghost whispers of dulled echoes.

"Norma. Are you home!"

He stood for a moment in the hall, listening, listening for a baby's cry, for the sounds of a woman busy at her work, for the music of a teleradio of the low hum of conversation.

He heard nothing.

The house was still, as silent as though it had never been lived in, the glossy surfaces of the furniture seeming as remote as that in a shop window. Slowly he closed the door behind him, not even wondering why it had been unlocked, and moved from the hall into the living room.

It was dark and empty, and he blinked beneath the brilliance of the lights as he closed the circuit. He frowned as he stared about the big room, feeling uneasy, uncomfortable, and yet not knowing just why. Slowly he drew a finger over the littered top of a polished table, staring at the trail he had made in the dust, staring at the stale biscuits on dusty plates, the sticky glasses, some marred with lipstick, others bearing the imprints of masculine hands. Ash trays overflowed, spilling butts and grey powder onto the stained carpet and the once-gleaming surfaces of tables and sideboards were dark with cigarette burns.

The kitchen was even worse.

Dirty plates filled the sink, the door of the refrigerator gaped on spoiled food and empty compartments. Empty bottles littered the floor, and the pulp and skins of various citrus fruits reeked in an unemptied garbage container. He stooped and picked up one of the empty bottles, reading the gaudy label, his nose wrinkling to an unfamiliar smell. He dropped it, letting it fall from his hand to smash against the floor, and now he knew what the disorder reminded him of.

The morning after the night before.

He had been to parties, had even thrown some during his brief periods home, and he remembered just how the house had looked afterwards, the filled ashtrays, the empty bottles, the general air of disruption and disorder. That had been bad. but not too bad, this . . .

His mouth tightened in disgust, and anger replaced the gnawing worry and doubt. Savagely he moved from room to room, switching on the lights, staring at the untidiness, the dust, the general air of neglect. He searched the ground floor, then climbed painfully up the stairs to the bedrooms. One of them

had been converted to a nursery, the walls papered with brightly coloured animals and Nursery Land Folk, fat little men and jolly Gnomes, Elves, Pixies, sitting on swollen toadstools, talking to rabbits and playing with wide-winged butterflies.

A cot stood in one corner, a delicate thing of smooth plastic and gossomer lace, and he crossed over to it, half-afraid to look inside, yet feeling his stomach tighten with excited anticipation as he stooped over the rim.

It was empty.

The little pillow was unmarked, the counterpane, the string of baby beads and a tiny rattle. All brand new. All bought with loving care and high hope. All unused.

Something burned his eyes and the fear and worry came back, replacing the anger and churning his stomach with unspoken grief. He left the room, the bright wallpaper and the silent cot, and his feet thudded on the pile of the soft carpeting as he moved from room to room.

In one of them he found his wife.

She lay sprawled on an unmade bed, her mouth open, her hair a black cloud of disorder, her skirt soiled and riding high above her silken knees. One shoe had fallen from her foot and the stocking had laddered, the wide trail writhing like a pale snake up her calf and over her knee. Make-up showed like a mask on her lax features, the red stain of her lipstick grotesque against her ghastly pallor, and her hands seemed like blood-tipped talons as they rested on the crumpled sheets.

At first he thought she was dead, and despair softened his muscles so that he almost fell. Then he stooped over her, his nose wrinkling to a acrid odour, and disgust took the place of despair as he realized the truth.

She was drunk.

For a long moment he stood, staring down at her, fighting the weakness of reaction and trying to bring order out of terrible chaos.

Norma was drunk. He had never seen her drunk before, she had rarely touched alcohol and her own pride and self-respect would have prevented her from ever getting into such a helpless condition. She was drunk but, — *where was the baby?*

He shouted at her, shaking her and trying to force her to answer the question. He failed. She stirred a little, muttered something, and rolled over on her side. Beneath her he caught a glimpse of something white, a scrap of intricate knitting, a tiny woolen garment, hand made, even clumsily made, a garment for

a new-born baby, and looking at it, he knew that the comatose woman on the bed had knitted it.

Grimly he set about sobering her up.

He staggered from the bathroom to the bedroom, carrying a great bowl of water, throwing it over her, refilling it, throwing it again. The bed became a sopping ruin, the sheets wringing wet, the carpets dark with oozing moisture, welling and squelching beneath his water-filled shoes.

He slapped her face, her hands, tugging at her hair and pulling her limp body so that she lolled on the edge of the bed. Slowly, very slowly, life returned to the alcohol-soaked body, awareness dawned on her lax features, her eyelids fluttered, opened, closed, opened again.

"Norma! Wake up, Norma! Norma!"

He shook her until her head rolled on her shoulders, until her hands lifted in instinctive self-defence, until her eyes registered something other than dull, animal-like consciousness.

He dragged her to the shower then, thrusting her into the cubicle, still fully dressed, and turned on the ice-cold needle spray. He spun the control valve until the pressure spray stung her with a thousand whips, then fumbled in the medicine cabinet for tablets and pills, guessing which would be best to use, then carelessly forcing her to swallow a mixture of them all.

He ran down to the kitchen, rummaging through the mess until he found coffee and the percolator. He filled it, ladling in heaped spoonfuls of the brown grains, and set it over an electric coil to boil. He climbed the stairs, wincing to the forgotten pain of his abused muscles, and dragging her from the lashing spray, stripped off her ruined clothes and rubbed her savagely with a rough towel. She began to cry, thrusting at his violent hands, and he snarled at her, slapping at her fingers, concentrating on getting her sober, closing his ears to her whimpered protest and weak struggles.

By the time he had dressed her in a loose house coat and got her downstairs he was weak from exertion and dripping with sweat.

But his wife was sober.

He watched her as she drank two cups of black coffee, sipping at his own cup, his mouth rebelling at the bitter taste of the strong liquid. He watched her as his presence began to register, the fact that he was home, that he was her husband, the fact that he had found her sodden drunk and the house looking like a pigsty with dust and neglect.

Somehow it didn't seem to worry her, and sudden anger made him slam the cup down onto the table.

"Well, Norma?"

"Well?"

"You know what I mean," he snapped. "All this," he gestured towards the disordered house, "can wait. Where is the baby?"

"Gone." She said the word without feeling, without emotion, as if it were something abstract, unimportant, unreal.

"I can see that, but where? Where is she?"

"She?" For the first time life seemed to return to her, and her eyes softened as she traced an aimless design on the tabletop. "How did you know it was a girl?"

"I didn't, I guessed." He forced himself to be gentle, to restrain his impatience, and the knuckles of his hands gleamed white through the skin as he gripped the arms of his chair. "Where is she, Norma?"

"I told you, she's gone."

"I know that, but where?"

"Where?" Slowly she shook her head and her eyes stared past him, stared through the walls of the house towards the distant glory of the burning stars. "I don't know, John. With the Angels perhaps. Where do babies go when they . . . ." Something seemed to catch in her throat, something which made her eyes glisten with tears and set her lips to quivering, her voice to breaking.

"When they what?"

"Please, John, don't make me say it. She's gone. Isn't that bad enough? Gone I tell you. Gone!"

"You mean that she's dead?" He stared at her in shocked unbelief, his heart thudding with sickening violence against his ribs, his mouth dry with sudden hate.

"You dirty, stinking, drunken slut! You killed her!"

The sound of his hand against her cheek echoed through the silent house.

The blow seemed to have finished what the water, the drugs and the coffee had begun, and when the initial shock had died, she was wholly sober. She touched her cheek, the mark of his fingers standing out against the pallid skin in ugly welts, then stared at her hand as if expecting to see it covered with blood. Then she stared at him and her eyes held an emotion he had never expected to see again.

Contempt.

It hurt. It hurt because he felt it undeserved, but at the same time he felt a stab of shame that he had slapped an unsuspecting woman, and the contempt in her eyes served to trigger his own self-dislike. He rubbed his tingling fingers, and

sought refuge in bluster and accusation.

"Look at the place! Filthy! What baby could be expected to live with a sot for a mother?" He saw the anguish in her eyes and knew that he was hurting her far more than the blow had done, but something within him, something born of fear and doubt and nagging worry, forced him to continue.

"So she died, and then what did you do, throw a party to celebrate?"

"Don't." She stared at him, her wide brown eyes pits of torment against the whiteness of her face. "How could you think like that? How could you?"

"Isn't it true?" He stared at the cluster of empty bottles, at the unwashed dishes and the dust and dirt. "Are you proud of your kitchen, Norma. Did your friends have a good time?"

"So I've had a few drinks." He recoiled a little from the sudden feral anger blazing from her eyes, from the anger which made her voice a brittle mockery of what it should have been. "So what? What did you want me to do while you were away, sit on my hands, say prayers for your safety? Haven't I a life of my own to live? Who are you to tell me what to do?"

"I'm your husband, the father of your child, or have you forgotten that?"

"No." She looked at him, and now the contempt was back in her eyes and her lips curled with the same emotion. "I haven't forgotten, how could I forget, I have an empty cradle to remind me of the *man* I married."

"Is that my fault, the empty cradle I mean, is it?"

"Yes."

He rose with a savage abruptness, sending his chair skittering over the polished floor, and his fingers dug into her shoulders as if they were hooks.

"What do you mean? Quick, tell me. How did the baby die?"

"Don't you know?" She stared at him, and though he gripped her with all the strength of arm and wrist muscles, yet she betrayed no feeling of pain.

"How can I know? Tell me."

"She died almost as soon as she was born, and I almost died with her, that's what you've done for your family."

"I've done?" He stepped back, shaking his head in puzzled bewilderment. "I don't understand. The baby died at birth, I can realize that, but why blame me? I was miles away, out in space, what could I have done to prevent it?"

"You could have been here, a wife likes to know that her man is beside her at a time like that. I

needed you then, John, needed you more than I ever have, more than I ever will, and you weren't there. I had to rely on strangers, friends, employees of the hospital, they were kind enough but it wasn't the same, it wasn't anywhere near the same."

"But you knew that would happen the last time I was home. You told me not to worry, that you would manage, what made you change?"

She shrugged, toying with her empty coffee cup, her thick black hair falling in disarranged coils over the whiteness of her shoulders. She seemed remote, disinterested, almost like a stranger, and he felt a barrier between them which had not existed before.

"Norma."

"Yes?"

"Look, Norma, perhaps I made a mistake, I'm sorry, I shouldn't have slapped you, but I was worried, I've looked forward to seeing the baby for so long and the disappointment was too great." He tried to touch her, to rest his hand on her shoulder, but she pulled away, and he sat down, biting his lips. "I'm sorry about the baby, you know that, but Norma, why have you changed?"

"Have I?"

"Yes. You don't seem at all pleased to see me, and Norma, even if the baby did die, we can always have another."

"No!"

"Why not?" He stared at her, not understanding the expression on her face, not liking it, feeling that somehow no woman should ever look at her husband in quite that way.

"I'll tell you why not." Her mouth twisted as she almost spat the words, sending them like bullets into the quivering surface of his self-importance. "You can't have a baby, that's why! You're not man enough to father a child and you never will be. Look at you! My God what made me ever marry such an apology of a man! I must have been a starry-eyed fool, blinded with the glamour of marrying a rocket pilot, and I thought that the reflected glory would be compensation enough. Well I was wrong. Nothing can compensate for a husband who isn't a husband, who is just someone who comes home for a few days each year, who has to be nursed and babied, shielded and apologized for. Not even the money you can give me can compensate for that empty cradle upstairs. I'm a normal woman, not a freak, and I want a normal husband and normal babies. I don't want you, you . . ."

The chiming of the doorbell merged with her sudden tears.

Bill Larrimer stood on the step, his wife Mary with him, and staring at them John felt a sick envy. They were both normal, well-matched, with three healthy children and had found contentment in each others company. He stared at them, and Bill shuffled his feet, clearing his throat with a nervousness surprising in so large a man.

"Hello, John. We'd have arrived sooner but the prop shaft of our turbine car snapped and we had to wait for transport." He hesitated, glancing over John's shoulder into the house. "May we come in?"

"I suppose so." John stood back and let them enter the house. Mary disappeared towards the kitchen and John would have followed her but Bill caught his arm and drew him into the big living room.

"I want to talk to you, John. Have you seen Norma?"

"I have."

"Was she . . . ?" Bill flushed, fumbling for words.

"She was drunk," said John bitterly. "You can see what the place is like for yourself."

"I know, that's what I want to talk to you about." The big man glanced around the littered room, then sat down on the edge of a settee. "Sit down, John, you look tired."

John nodded and slumped down beside the big man. He was tired, his muscles burned with fatigue and his legs quivered, threatening to collapse beneath him at any moment. He rested his hands on his knees, trying to stop their trembling, and his mouth felt gritty and full of slime.

"Do you know about the baby, John?"

"She told me."

"Norma?"

"Who else? You didn't seem to want to."

"I know, John, I'm sorry about that, but we'd hoped to get here before you." The big man sighed, then braced himself as if for an unpleasant task. "I was at the hospital when it was born, Norma needed a friend and I've known her nearly all my life. She had a bad time, John, very bad, she almost died and at one time they feared for her sanity.

"So?"

"So things aren't quite the same as when you left." He sighed again, deliberately staring at the silent bulk of the teleradio cabinet. "I'll make this short, John, I don't like what I'm doing."

"Then get on with it."

"I will. Norma wants a divorce, John, and you've got to let her have it."

"A divorce?" John stared at the big man. "Are you serious? Do you

know what you're saying? I just can't give her up like that, she means too much to me, we mean too much to each other, you must be making a mistake."

"No, John. I wish I were but I'm not. Norma must end this marriage, for the sake of both of you." He paused and gestured towards the littered room. "This is just a beginning, John, can you guess what will follow?"

He nodded, knowing what the big man was getting at. When a woman was good, she was perfect, but when she was bad . . . A woman like Norma knew no halfway mark, with her it was all or none, and if she had lost her self-respect, then life with her would be a continuous nightmare.

First the drinking, the wild parties, the dull coma induced by too much alcohol. Then the moral fibre would slip, drugs, strange men, any sort of a man, and the shrill forced laughter of a damned soul trying to justify a mode of life foreign to her nature. If a divorce could save her then it was a small price to pay, but . . . ?

"She wants children, John. Babies she can mother and nurse and watch grow into healthy children. She must have them, John, her whole nature cries out for them, and without them . . . " He shrugged, staring at the disordered room.

"I can give her that." John stared down at his trembling hands. "I can give her babies, I want them just as much as she does you know, she doesn't have to get a divorce, we can still be happy together."

"No, John."

"No? What do you mean?"

"You can't give her children. You've been in space too long, it was a miracle that she ever conceived and after your last trip it would be an impossibility. You're sterile, John, the radiations of space have destroyed you as a parent. Norma must marry a normal man if she is to regain her moral sanity."

"You're lying!"

"No. I'm not lying. Your child was a girl, did you know that? But it was something else too. It was an unsuccessful mutation, John, a freak, it was a mercy that it died." He glanced pityingly down at the man at his side, resting one big hand on the pilot's shoulder, feeling the muscles jump and quiver beneath his palm.

"I'm sorry John, damn sorry, but that's the way it is."

He didn't answer, he was staring through a film of tears at the ruin of a broken life.

It had always been the same. At school, at work, then later at the academy, it had always been

the same. At first, when he had been accepted as a spaceman, things had been different. The rocket ships were still new and the men who rode between the planets on wings of flames were heroes, but it didn't last, it never lasted.

When he had married, when he had a beautiful woman to call his own, one who loved and respected him, then it had seemed that he would know real contentment. For three years now he had known that happiness, when life was a series of bright spots between the lonely journeys, and home was where his wife waited to welcome him. But now . . .

He rose from the settee, stumbling a little as he headed towards the kitchen. Mary stared at him as he entered, then, moved by some womanly intuition, left him alone with his wife.

"Norma." He moved towards her, his hands outstretched, his eyes like those of an injured animal. "Bill has just told me about the baby. I'm sorry, more sorry than you can ever know. Can you forgive me, dear?"

"For what?"

"For the things I said, the blow, the insults. I didn't know, and I'd looked forward so much to seeing the baby . . . " His voice trailed into silence as he saw the expression in her eyes.

"Did he say anything else?"

"He told me that you wanted a divorce. Is that true?"

"Yes."

"Can't you think it over? Wait for another trip? Maybe we could adopt a child, more than one if you like, anything to make you happy, but don't leave me, Norma. Please don't leave me."

"It's no good, John." For a moment pity replaced the contempt in her eyes and she touched him gently on the head. "I can't live like this any longer. I want a man who can be a husband to me, take me out, take me dancing, swimming, walking, all the things we could never do. It isn't that I hate you, John, it's just that . . . "

"You want a man instead of a freak." He nodded, and his legs felt as if they were made of water as he headed for the stairs. Slowly he entered the nursery, the room with the bright wallpaper and the accusing emptiness of the lonely cot. He stooped over it, staring at where the baby should have been, then recoiled with an insane hope.

Something stared up at him from the tiny pillow. A little thing, carved from exotic woods, plumed and tufted with brilliant feathers and with tiny gems for eyes.

The Venusian doll.

He picked it up, staring at the cunning perfection of the joints,

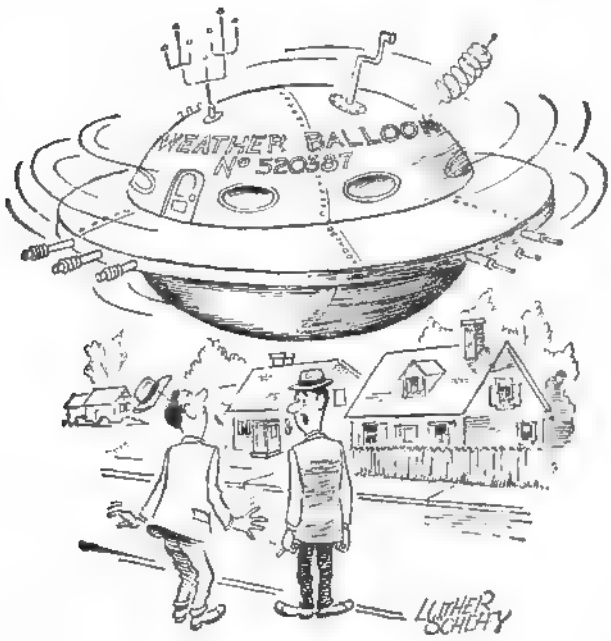
the oddly humorous grin on the lopsided face, and in his hand he held all the bitter hope and unsatisfied longing of the barren years. A doll. His dead baby's doll. Brought across limitless distance to mock him with what might have been.

He threw it to the floor, stamping on it, smashing the cunning joints and soiling the gay feathers. He pounded the face with his heel, forcing the gems from their sockets and leaving the toy sightless and blind. He kicked at it, the tears streaming down his face, the sound of his foot as it met the wood a dull accompaniment to his thudding heart.

Then, because there was nothing else he could do, he went out into the night, out beneath the cold stars, the fairy trails of strat-rockets, and the cold night air.

All forty five inches of him.

THE END



"What's the matter? Ain't you ever seen a weather balloon before?"

THE IMMORTAL BARD

By Isaac Asimov

Illustrated by Lawrence

"OH, yes," said Dr. Phineas Welch, "I can bring back the spirits of the illustrious dead."

He was a little drunk, or maybe he wouldn't have said it. Of course, it was perfectly all right to get a little drunk at the annual Christmas party.

Scott Robertson, the school's young English instructor, adjusted his glasses and looked to right and left to see if they were overheard, "Really, Dr. Welch."

"I mean it. And not just the spirits; the bodies, too."

"I wouldn't have said it were possible," said Robertson, primly.

"Why not. A simple matter of temporal transference."

"Time travel? That's impossible!"

"Not if you know how."

"Well, how, Dr. Welch?"

"Think I'm going to tell you?" asked the physicist gravely. He looked vaguely about for another drink and didn't find any. He said, "I brought quite a few back. Archimedes, Newton, Galileo. Poor fellows."

"Didn't they like it here? I should think they'd have been fascinated by our modern science," said Robertson. He was beginning to enjoy the conservation.

"Oh, they were. They were. Especially Archimedes. I thought he'd go mad with joy at first after I explained a little of it in some Greek I'd boned up on, but no—no—"

"What was wrong?"

"Just a different culture. They couldn't get used to our way of life. They got terribly lonely and frightened. I had to send them back."

"That's too bad."

"Yes. Great minds, but not flexible minds. Not universal. So I tried Shakespeare."

"*What?*" yelled Robertson. This was getting closer to home.

"Don't yell, my boy," said Welch. "It's bad manners."

"Did you say you brought back Shakespeare?"

"I did. I needed someone with a universal mind; someone who knew people well enough to be able to live with them centuries away from his own time. Shakespeare was the man. I've got his signature. As a memento, you know."

"On you?" asked Robertson, eyes bugging.

"Right here." Welch fumbled in one vest pocket after another. "Ah, here it is."

A little piece of pasteboard was passed to the instructor. On one side it said: "L. Klein & Sons, Wholesale Hardware". On the other side, in straggly script, was written, "Willm Shaksper."

A wild surmise filled Robertson. "What did he look like?"

"Not like his pictures. Bald and an ugly mustache. He spoke in a thick brogue. Of course, I did my best to please him with our times. I told him we thought highly of his plays and still put them on the boards. In fact, I said we thought they were the greatest pieces of literature in the English language, maybe in any language."

"Good. Good," said Robertson breathlessly.

"I said people had written volumes of commentaries on his plays. Naturally he wanted to see one and I got one for him from the library."

"And?"

"Oh, he was fascinated. Of course, he had trouble with the

current idioms and references to events since 1600, but I helped out. Poor fellow. I don't think he ever expected such treatment. He kept saying, 'God ha' mercy! What cannot be racked from words in five centuries. One could wring, methinks, a flood from a damp clout'!"

"He wouldn't say that."

"Why not? He wrote his plays as quickly as he could. He said he had to on account of the deadlines. He wrote Hamlet in less than six months. The plot was an old one. He just polished it up."

"That's all they do to a telescope mirror. Just polish it up," said the English instructor indignantly.

The physicist disregarded him. He made out an untouched cocktail on the bar some feet away and sidled toward it. "I told the immortal bard that we even gave college courses in Shakespeare."

"*I* give one."

"I know. I enrolled him in your evening extension course. I never saw a man so eager to find out what posterity thought of him as poor Bill was. He worked hard at it."

"You enrolled William Shakespeare in my course?" mumbled Robertson. Even as an alcoholic fantasy, the thought staggered him. And *was* it an alcoholic fantasy. He was beginning to recall a bald man with a queer way of talking—

"Not under his real name, of course," said Dr. Welch. "Never mind what he went under. It was a mistake, that's all. A big mistake. Poor fellow." He had the cocktail now and shook his head at it.

"Why was it a mistake? What happened?"

"I had to send him back to 1600," roared Welch, indignantly. "How much humiliation do you think a man can stand?"

"What humiliation are you talking about?"

"Dr. Welch tossed off the cocktail. "Why, you poor simpleton, you *flunked* him."

THE END

Illustrated by Lawrence

PANACEA

By Dean A. Grennell

Thaddeus Q. Pangbourne decided to let the natives of Venus have the benefit of his Peerless Patent Panacea; but a patent medicine made with Venusian ingredients might possibly have unexpected results. It did; in fact, it put a definite strain on the diplomatic relations of Earth and Venus.

AND so I bring you, ladies and gentlemen, the priceless boon of everlasting health. I bring you freedom from disease—relief from all the plagues and megrims which harass a tortured mankind. I bring you Doctor Pangbourne's Peerless Patent Panacea!

"This matchless blessing for the sufferer is the ultimate result of a lifetime of research. It combines hitherto unknown secrets of the physicians of Ancient Egypt with the newest medical discoveries of today and the day after tomorrow!

"It is a life-giving tonic, containing a superabundance of all the vitamins and minerals needed for the glowing euphoria of perfect health. Take it regularly and the Grim Reaper will blunt his scythe upon you in vain!

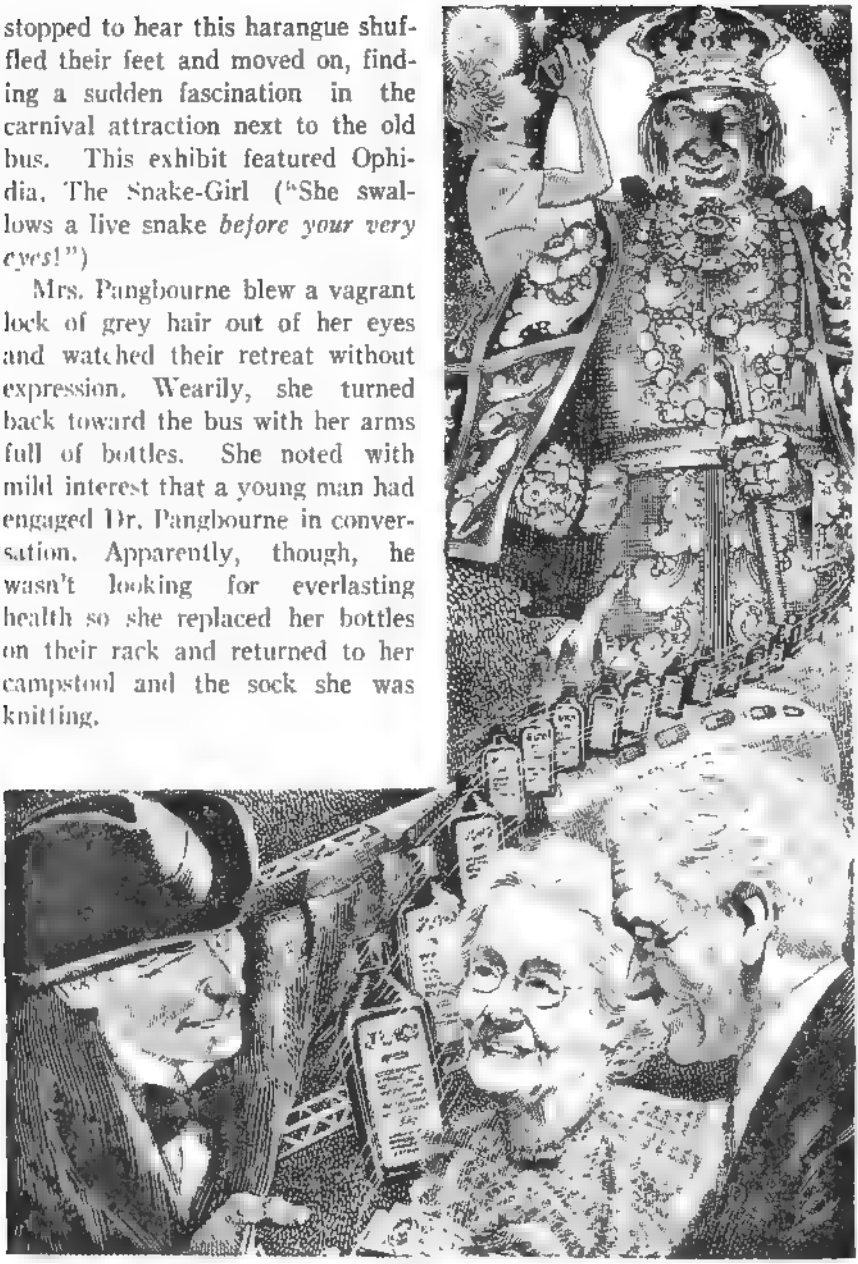
"Now the regular price of Doctor Pangbourne's Peerless Patent Panacea is a paltry five dollars for the giant family size—less than the cost of a single wreath of flowers to lay upon the bier of some poor soul who never learned of its incr-redible benefits! Five insignificant dollars for blessed relief from any disease or disorder—*any one of them!*

"I want to introduce this unique compound to you. I want you to learn of its wonderful properties first-hand. To do this, I shall give—yes, I shall '*give*'—a full, giant, family-size bottle to each person who offers me a single dollar in the next thirty seconds! My assistant will now pass among you . . . "

The few curious ones who had

stopped to hear this harangue shuffled their feet and moved on, finding a sudden fascination in the carnival attraction next to the old bus. This exhibit featured Ophidia, The Snake-Girl ("She swallows a live snake *before your very eyes!*")

Mrs. Pangbourne blew a vagrant lock of grey hair out of her eyes and watched their retreat without expression. Wearily, she turned back toward the bus with her arms full of bottles. She noted with mild interest that a young man had engaged Dr. Pangbourne in conversation. Apparently, though, he wasn't looking for everlasting health so she replaced her bottles on their rack and returned to her campstool and the sock she was knitting.



Doctor Thaddeus Quincy Pangbourne (Ph. D.) had no delusions about the prospects of selling tonic to his visitor. It wasn't that the man—who had introduced himself as Esal Scurpp—didn't look as though he needed a tonic. Somehow he just didn't have the appearance of a man who worries about his health. That pasty complexion, now . . .

Pangbourne found his manner of approach a bit jarring, too.

"Business is lousy in the patent-medicine line, ain't it, Doc?"

The Doctor's goatee jutted indignantly.

"I fail to see where that is any of your affair!" he replied with some asperity.

"Ahh, come off it, Doc!" Scurpp was scornful. "I been watching your pitch for quite a while and you ain't sold three bottles all afternoon. Socialized medicine has plumb ruined your racket."

Thaddeus groped for a crushing retort.

"I still don't see why that should tear *your* heart out." His voice lent an odd note of mild savagery to the reply.

"Oh, but it *does*, Doc—" There was no discouraging this fellow. "You see, I got the very thing you need to clean up with."

"I'm afraid we're well supplied with brooms and brushes."

"You just ain't reading me, Doc. What you need is to get to fresh territory. New worlds to conquer, that's what you need."

Thaddeus was one of those who find it hard to be rude to people, no matter how they deserve rudeness.

"Did you have such a world in mind?" he asked, reaching for sarcasm.

"Sure," said the oily one. "Venus, that's where. I just came from there and it's a natural for a guy like you. The gooks are sick all the time and they'll buy anything."

"It appears to me there's a slight hitch." Thad felt a vague stir of interest in spite of himself. "We are, at present, on Earth and the fare to take us to Venus is more than I care to think about."

"I know the rates are steep. But did you ever think of having a spaceship all your own? Then you could pack up and hop from town to town. Why, you could even make a run back to Earth for a fresh batch of snake-oil."

Pangbourne bristled. "Young man, I'll thank you to remember that it is *not* 'snake-oil' but, rather, a carefully compounded mixture of . . . "

"Yeah, yeah—I heard the spiel you were giving the suckers. Skip

that — you're missing the main idea."

"I'm afraid I can't even *see* the main idea! Where in Blue Tunket would a man like me get the price of a space-ship? I'm compelled to admit that I don't even have the price of enough fuel to take a liner from here to Venus."

"That's the point, Doc— that's the *point! I* ain't talking about no liner. There's a lot of space-yachts and such that the rich guys buy to go cutting around in and then sell for a song after a season or so. If you ain't got a brand-new 2078 job, you just don't rate in those circles."

"And by some happy chance, you just happen to have such a vessel for sale at a mere pittance, I suppose?"

"How on earth did you manage to guess that, Doc? You must be physic!" Scurpp must have read the expression somewhere, for he gave it just that pronounciation— physic.

There was an elfin twinkle in Thad's eye as he turned and spoke over his shoulder.

"The man wants to sell us a space-ship, Mother."

Like many people who marry late in life and remain childless, it pleased them to use the titles of parenthood.

Imperturbable was the word for Elvira Pangbourne. She didn't miss a stitch.

"Yes, Pa," she said, "I heard; but where would we get the money?"

Thaddeus turned back to Scurpp with an inquiring glance.

"Maybe he could answer that."

Esal got briskly down to business.

"About how much do you think you'd be able to raise?"

Thad thought bleakly about their tiny hoard laid away for a "rainy day." Stalling for time, he asked if he was supposed to buy a pig in a poke. Where was this so-wonderful space yacht?

"I got a ground-car over here at the lot. I was hoping you'd like to come out and take a look at it."

They rode out to the rocket port and Scurpp drove the little three-wheeled runabout up the ramp to the ship. Elvira sat in the rear seat, having laid her knitting aside with the air of one who expects to return shortly.

The ship stood there, tall, slim and sleekly beautiful in the gathering dusk. This was no weary old freighter, with blast-pocked tubes and loose connections in the instrument panels. It was of recent vintage and superbly maintained. Thad ran his hand over the smooth

fin and kicked the grounding cushions in what he hoped was a profound and judicious manner. It was the first time he'd ever seen a space-ship close up but he didn't want to betray his ignorance.

"Beautiful, ain't she?" Scurpp volunteered proudly. "She sleeps four and a crew of two."

"That's another thing that occurs to me," objected Thad. "Neither of us has any experience in piloting anything bigger than the old bus. And heaven knows, we can't afford to hire a crew to run it for us."

By the way of answer, Scurpp led them up the telescoping ramp into a surprisingly roomy lounge. He handed Thad a thick book entitled "Pilot's Manual for the 2075 Bergstrom Space-Rover" and indicated several books on Astrogation, Maintenance and Space Regulations.

"Confidentially," he said, "they carry the crew along to do the dirty work—cooking, making beds and such. That's what the playboys get their biggest charge out of—making like a pilot."

"You mean I could skim through this book and learn enough about running the thing to be able to get around?"

Esal assured him that he could. He showed Thad how to look up a pre-plotted course in the Ephemeris and punch it into the automatic pilot for a pre-set time when the relays would be activated by a broadcast signal from the Government Observatory. He explained how it would hold to the course and compensate for minor variations by taking radio fixes as the voyage progressed. It even had HDA which he translated as "Hazard Detection and Avoidance". It could be set to give a signal and relinquish control at any previously determined altitude over the destination. By switching it off, manual control could be assumed at any time.

"An eight-year-old," he stoutly maintained, "could take this job to Pluto and bring her back."

Thad wondered what kind of parents would let their children go gadding off to the ends of the system on solo flights but he didn't choose to make an issue of it. Instead, he wondered aloud.

"But what about fuel? Isn't that expensive?"

"Not anymore. The drive on this ship uses the new synthetized fuels and the tanks hold enough for a dozen round trips." He peered at a gauge. "They're nearly full right now."

Thad was impressed. He turned to Elvira, for such an important

decision was not his alone to make.

"Well, Mother?"

"I still haven't heard the gentleman mention a price. It seems to me that he'd want a lot more than we could afford to give him." And then she added, wistfully, "But it would be nice to see another world while we can still see it together."

"Well, old boy," Thad thought to himself, *"here goes the ballgame!"*

"The very most we could possibly dig up would be about twelve hundred dollars." Thad expected anything but the man's ready agreement.

"If it weren't for the fact that my poor old Mother is bad sick and I need the dough to rush to her bedside I'd laugh in your face. As it is, I'll take twelve C's and the old bus 'cause I ain't got time to look for a better offer. You're getting a steal, brother!"

The Pangbournes expressed sympathy for the ailing lady and Thad insisted on giving the man a couple bottles of his remedy for Mrs. Scurpp to try, pointing out that you never could tell.

It didn't seem long at all before the transaction was completed and Thad and Elvira stood on the ramp and watched the venerable old bus wheeze down the road. Esal looked out of the driver's window and waved in farewell as the bus rounded a row of maintainence sheds and vanished.

"Well, I surely hope his Mother gets better," Elvira said.

They climbed up into the unfamiliar luxury of their new home and set to work putting the hastily-loaded things away. Thad stacked the cases of concentrate away in the luggage lockers. There was enough to make up several hundred bottles and he was glad he'd laid in a fresh supply only recently.

When their gear had been stowed away Thad settled down on a reclining chair with a cigar from the Captain's locker and an arm-load of books.

It was nearly mid-night when he looked up from his concentration to where Elvira sat, her tireless needles clicking rhythmically.

"Well Mother," he said, calm assurance and no small amount of pride in his voice, "I think I can make her go."

Elvira looked up. "Yes, Pa?"

"I feel sure of it and I know of one way to find out. Right now."

"But it's night, Pa. Why not wait until daylight?"

"What difference does it make? It will be daylight soon after we take off and the automatic pilot doesn't need light to find its way around."

Elvira objected mildly. It felt so nice to sit quietly enjoying the

soft chair, the panelled walls, the pretty carpeting and the bright, but gentle lighting. Thad overcame her protests by pointing out that she would have plenty of time for that after they were underway. Finally she agreed and he managed to look up the settings and punch them in with time enough to catch the second quarter-hourly signal after the decision had been made.

They relaxed on the deep hydraulic cushions of the bunks as the ship lifted skyward, its take-off unexpectedly quiet in the thickly-insulated cabin. The acceleration of two gravities wasn't too bad lying down. Elvira even drifted off to sleep after a while. But before this, her voice had made a disquieting speculation.

"Thaddeus, I can't help but wonder . . . "

"Yes, Mother?"

"If the young man wanted to get home so quickly, why didn't he take this ship?"

Thaddeus assured her that it was probably because of the difficulty of making point-to-point hops on a planet with a ship designed for longer trips. But he lay there for a long time after Elvira's faint, musical snores proclaimed her slumber.

For the manual had stressed the maneuverability of this particular model for sight-seeing after arrival.

Full of the gnawing self-doubts which follow the taking of an irrevocable step—and now it didn't seem that he had given it the consideration he should have—he finally drifted off to a fitful sleep. He was troubled by his unaccustomed weight which was a shade over three hundred pounds with the drive on it and it was hard to move. There was some kind of nonsensical dream about a smooth-talking young man whose hair dripped motor-oil, hawking used spacecraft from the back platform of the old bus . . .

They woke up when the drive cut back to its cruising rate of one-quarter earth-normal. Despite a few stiff joints from hours of double-weight they felt as if years had been lopped from their ages. Thad reminded his wife that the gravity of Venus would take about sixteen pounds of weight off of her feet and she was pleased and greatly impressed. Their doubts of a few hours before had evaporated like early morning fog and they made a gay adventure of exploring the ship.

Elvira was delighted to find the freezer compartment stocked with foods they hadn't been able to afford in years—some, in fact, that they'd never even heard of.

Thad was in favor of making an

epicurean feast out of breakfast but Elvira pointed out that there was no telling how long the food might have to last them and how did they know things would be any better on Venus than they had been on Earth?

After breakfast they went to look out of the view-port at the blazing glory of stars undimmed by air and haze. Elvira squeezed Thad's hand as he showed her the shimmering pearl that awaited them.

They landed on Venus the third week out, dropping through the blinding white overcast with calm confidence in the all-seeing HDA to keep their course free of obstacles. Thad made a very creditable first landing—the lighter gravity helped somewhat. He felt a pleasant glow of accomplishment as he pressed the button which opened the lock and lowered the ramp. Hand in hand, like a pair of children exploring a haunted house, the Pangbournes went down to set foot on Sol's second planet.

The light was dazzling-bright and the air was hot, with a smell which was unfamiliar but not unpleasant. Around the clearing, the trees stretched up to incredible heights and undergrowth matted thickly about their trunks. Thad and Elvira were quite enchanted.

There was a cluster of native houses nearby, which was why they had chosen this clearing for their landing-place. The natives were coming out to meet them—evidently they didn't see many space-going vessels in this area.

The Venusians clustered about their visitors like a group of curious children. The effect was spoiled a bit by the fact that there was scarcely a one of them who was less than seven feet tall.

Thad, speaking just below a shout (on the theory that everybody understands English if it's loud), asked if there was anybody around who could talk with them.

One of the crowd was pushed to the fore, where he announced that he (the Pangbournes supposed that "he" was the right pronoun, which later proved correct) could speak a fair sort of English.

His name — as close as Thad could pronounce it — was Ivlek Rotan and he had worked for a colony of Terrans up the river at one time. His English was a bit rusty, but Thad didn't have too much trouble making himself understood.

There wasn't much doubt that the Venusians would be a ready market for medicaments. Their skins were of a peculiar verdant shade, midway between aqua and bottle-green. There seemed to be some sort of skin-rash that was

quite prevalent, for all of them had a number of sores on their faces, arms and legs. It looked like a sort of super acne. Thad made a mental note to find out the name for it and stress the beneficial properties of his remedy on this particular complaint.

Which reminded him—his stocks of bottled remedy were running a bit low. He had only been mixing up small batches back home, what with the meager demand and all, and it looked like he'd be needing more of the stuff here. At least, he hoped he would be!

So he got a five-gallon crock from the ship, and a jug of concentrate. As an afterthought, he added a bit of extra paraphernalia from their luggage. If the natives were going to watch him mix the remedy, he might as well put on a bit of a show for them.

They trooped down to the river, still followed by what must have been almost the entire population of the village. Thad tested the water with his finger, found it hot and then withdrew hastily as a thing like an outsize barracuda came swooping up to investigate.

So he used a longhandled dipper to ladle the greenish river water into the crock. When he had it nearly three-quarters full, he added about half a gallon of concentrate from the jug, made a few cabalistic gestures and started to stir it.

With his free hand, he broke off a branch from a nearby shrub which bore several large blue berries. He plucked one off and offered it to a nearby child. The little one ate it with neither joy nor alarm. This provided some vital information to Thad—the berries were edible, or the older natives would have restrained the young one from eating them.

Thad squeezed an enthusiastic amount of the berry-juice into the mixture and stirred well.

Then he went back to the ship and rummaged through their gear until he located some old fireworks —a relic of some far-off fourth-of-July engagement — and burned them by the crock, pretending to fan the smoke across the solution.

For good measure he threw in some seidlitz powders, which foamed up impressively. He deemed it good theater at this point to chant a few bars of "Bei Mir bist du Schoen" and make some more motions with the hands.

He aimed to give his clientele their money's worth.

Doctor Pangbourne's Peerless Patent Panacea, usually a clear sunny yellow, came out a rather turgid shade of off-blue, but Thad was satisfied. After all, he thought, it *should* look different—it had to

cure different maladies in a totally different species of patient. He shook a bottle and squinted judiciously at the contents.

It certainly looked as if it ought to cure *something!*

So he set to work with Ivlek doing the heavy lifting and hauling, to build a platform from a few boards and packing cases. As they worked, he coached his new assistant on the fine art of salesmanship.

Ivlek was an apt pupil, as he proved when they had finished the stand and commenced the sales-pitch. Thad would peer at the crowd through the pair of sunglasses which sat astride his nose, incongruous above the white goatee, and expound the virtues of his elixir for a minute or two. Then he'd hand the bottle to Ivlek, who would shake it at the crowd in fine imitation of Thad's gestures and reiterate a literal translation in gobbling, clacking, Venish.

The first invitation to purchase resulted in one of the maddest stampedes ever experienced. The stack of bottles melted away like beer at a German picnic.

And before they were all gone, Ivlek had managed to find time to buy three bottles for himself.

And so it went, through village after village. Ivlek had decided to hitch his wagon to the Pangbourne star and was teaching Thad a little basic Venish so that he could at least make his greeting and a few telling points in the language of his audience. The Pangbourne's cup of joy was running over and they blessed the young man who had told them of this El Dorado.

At least they did until one day about a week and a half after their arrival. They were just about ready to return to Earth for bottles and raw material and were trying to persuade Ivlek to come along for the trip. The ship's strong-box was overflowing with the little, sun-baked venucotta plaques that were the local medium of exchange. Business had been magnificent.

Thad was just inquiring as to where they could convert their take into Terran legal tender when they heard the sound of an approaching ship and looked up to see the ugly, lethal lines of a blue-black Patrol ship appear through the overcast. It settled on blazing jets amid a cloud of dust and flying mud and a squad of men disembarked and came towards them, marching in smart formation.

Their leader's greeting was brief and very much to the point.

"Pangbourne," he snapped, "you are under arrest!"

Elvira gasped. Ivlek vented a

whistle of surprise. Thad leaped to his feet, causing a number of guns to regard him with unwinking black muzzles.

"Under *arrest?*" His blue eyes blazed and his voice was an outraged bellow. "What in Blue Tunket for?"

"What for?" The Officer was aghast at such effrontery. "What *not* for? You've done just about everything there's a law against except commit murder and adultery and I wouldn't even be surprised if we turn up evidence of those!"

He produced a sizable piece of paper and commenced to read from it.

"Operating an interplanetary vessel without permit, license or registry. Making an inter-planetary voyage without clearing customs at take-off or landing. Flagrant violation of the Pure Food and Drug Law, with Interplanetary amendments. Unlawful sale by misrepresentation to natives of a commodity not cleared by their government. Purchase of a space-going vessel without payment of transaction tax. Purchase and possession of stolen property, unlawful flight to evade capture . . . "

Thad sagged like a collapsing balloon. Somehow he couldn't bring himself to look at Elvira. He could feel the look in Ivlek's eyes, warm with shocked sorrow.

"But I didn't *know* it had been stolen!"

"Ignorance is no excuse and I hereby warn you that anything you may say will be taken down in writing and used against you . . . "

The officer rattled off the time-worn formula in a ritualistic sing-song, and snapped a pair of gleaming hand-cuffs on Thad's wrists. It took three Patrolmen to hold him when he saw them putting the cuffs on Elvira too. This was too much!

But Elvira wasn't too disturbed. She managed to fetch along her knitting-bag.

"How much did you pay for that ship?" the Officer asked as they were being led away.

Thad looked back, craning his neck for a final view of the shining thing that had been his joy and undoing. Ivlek stood by, watching helplessly as a crew of Patrolmen prepared to take the ship back to their headquarters.

"Twelve hundred dollars," muttered Thad. And he knew what the Officer was going to say.

"Twelve hundred? Boy what a laugh *that* is! Do you know what those things cost?"

"I'm afraid I do now."

They put the Pangbournes on hard benches in the Patrol ship and fastened their ankles to chains anchored to rings set in the wall.

The savage acceleration at the takeoff strained painfully at the old couple's bones. Thad looked up once to find Elvira regarding him with tender compassion.

"It's all right, Pa." Her voice was clear and firm over the drumming roar of the jets. "You meant well."

Thad buried his face in his hands and wept, the chain on his handcuffs jingling faintly as the sobs shook his shoulders.

Elvira was taken away when they got to the prison. She was led down the echoing corridor, a matron on each side and her knitting-bag in her manacled hands. To Thad, each receding foot-fall was a dagger twisted in his heart. He wished that he was five years dead and in the grave that all this would have never happened.

The gray day stretched into a gray week. The air in the cell was hot and humid and foul. Thad sank deeper into apathy. Instead of looking fifteen years younger than his actual sixty-five, he looked a very decrepit ninety.

A faint spark of the old Thad Pangbourne came flickering to the surface when they brought the greasy-haired Scurpp, heavily chained, to look in the cell door and identify him for the record.

Thad raged and tore at the bars. If he could have laid his hands on the creature, he'd have rent him limb from limb. He went so far as to say so with vivid description of gory details and choice bits of character analysis picked up in years with the carnival.

"Ahhh—shut up, you old basset! I told you it was a steal, didn't I?"

Thad subsided as Scurpp was led away and soon he was back on the bunk, staring dully at the sweating wall, his mind millions of miles away on a happy planet where the skies were blue (sometimes, at least) and the living was precarious but honest (well—*reasonably* honest).

At length his reverie was broken by the hollow sound of footsteps coming down the corridor, accompanied by a faint jingling noise. It was a turnkey and a pair of guards. They halted outside his door.

"Pangbourne?"

"Yes?"

"Someone to see you in the Warden's office."

The DA, thought Thad, or maybe a cheap shyster who makes an odd buck taking cases where the court assigns a defense attorney.

He didn't expect to see . . .

"Ivlek! Why you old son of a *gun!*"

Ivlek was standing and he seemed a bit embarrassed by Thad's greeting. Thad's eyes turned to

Ivlek's companion and he saw why everybody else was standing too.

He was a Venusian of imposing proportions and awe-inspiring appearance. More than a foot taller than Ivlek, he had an air of leonine dignity hard to visualize on a head shaped like a football. He was dressed in a uniform of glowing colors which flashed and changed hues as he moved. He turned, inquiringly, to Ivlek.

"This is the man?"

"Yes, excellency," replied Ivlek, who turned to Thad and announced simply, "His Ultimate Supremacy, Igirf Eriad the Twelfth, Emperor of All Venus."

Ivlek walked over to Thad and removed the jerkin-like garment which covered the upper half of his body.

"I have taken your medicine regularly, Doctor Pangbourne, and I just want you to look at my skin."

He turned around slowly. Thad gulped and choked a bit. When Ivlek was facing him again, he could hardly meet the Venusian's gaze.

The bluish-green skin was pebbled solidly with a covering of the sores, almost edge-to-edge.

Thad was surprised to find that he could feel even worse than he had before. He hadn't thought it possible.

"Iv, old fellow, I'm sorry. You don't know how sorry I am!"

"You're *sorry?* Why should Doctor Pangbourne be sorry?"

"Your *eci-sebuc,* Ivlek — your little bumps—you've got more of them than you had before."

"That's right, Doctor. And I never felt better in my life!"

"Never felt *better?* How can that be?"

"I thought I explained that to you, Doctor. Those *eci-sebuc* are how we keep cool—we can't perspire like an earth-man, or pant like one of your dogs, so we lose heat through those—as you call them—'little bumps'."

To Thad, the room seemed to whirl slightly. He had a momentary mad impulse to fly out through the open window, since he was probably dreaming anyway. He turned to see the Emperor coming toward him.

Eriad put his hands on Thad's shoulders and looked down into his eyes.

"In the name of my people, Doctor Pangbourne, I want to thank you!"

He turned to the Warden who stood, pop-eyed with amazement, against the wall.

"How can I bring about Doctor Pangbourne's release?"

"His re-re-release?" The Warden stammered, temporarily at a loss for words. "Why—that is—

that would be most difficult, your excellency. Very difficult indeed. He's been caught red-handed with a stolen ship—that's grand larceny on a pretty grand scale, you know—heh-heh—and then there's a host of other charges . . . "

"But nothing we can't fix, eh Warden? The deep-set magenta eyes twinkled. "You see, there isn't any more of Doctor Pangbourne's Peerless Patent Panacea left and we need him to mix us some more. The *eci-schucs* start to thin out as soon as we stop taking it. Really, I must ask that you release him to my custody!"

"Impossible, I'm afraid, your Excellency—I'd like to, of course, but I just don't have the power!"

The Emperor's face took on a sterner look.

"Surely I don't have to remind you that there is a treaty between our governments coming up for ratification? I understand that your Ambassador is more than a little worried over whether I will agree to some of the provisions or not.

"Now I *hate* to use coercion, but I feel I should point out that I would enter into negotiations with a much more favorable attitude if my friend, here, were given a free and unconditional pardon."

The Warden gagged slightly, but one of the other Terran officials whispered urgently in his ear. He swallowed manfully and spoke, with a venomous side-glance at Thad.

"I am informed that it can be arranged, your Excellency."

"I assume, of course, that the pardon will include the good Doctor's wife?"

The Warden made a suffering noise, but a signal from the other man caught his eye.

"Yes—yes, of course, your Excellency!"

"And while we're at it," continued the Emperor thoughtfully, "I think that the Earth Government ought to award him the clear and perpetual title to the ship he arrived in, as well as a life-time license to operate it as he sees fit, without hinderance. That should help, in some small measure, to compensate him for his mental anguish."

The Warden agreed mechanically. He knew when he was beaten, but it was plainly sticking in his craw.

Ivlek shrugged his jacket back on and addressed Thad.

"Everything's all right now, Doctor Pangbourne. Let's go surprise Mrs. Doctor Pangbourne with the good news."

"Nothing surprises Elvira," said Thaddeus Q. Pangbourne, as he bowed to Eriad and hastened out the door, "but let's go and tell her, by all means!"

TESTING, TESTING

The Major had two problems — shielding for cosmic radiations and Dr. Alice Wright. He counted on the Martain helping solve the first problem, so that he could concentrate on dealing with the second one.

By Eando Binder

"NO, I won't marry you," Alice Wright answered. "And yes, the mice show certain signs of radiation burn. Probably cosmic rays. We'll see if they survive, in a few days."

Major John Mack sucked in his lips, sighing. "So many problems. D'you think we'll ever get a ship to the moon, Alice? If cosmic rays already start whooping it up at a mere 350 miles, what about open space? Clear of all shielding atmosphere? Could any human pilot survive? And what's wrong with me for a husband, Alice?"

Dr. Alice Wright shrugged. "We are trying our best to add up all the answers here at the Space Medicine Labs. But there's a cheering note. Look at Bebop, quite chipper and happy. Maybe primate life is sturdier against cosmic rays out there, which makes for more hope for his cousins."

She smiled and lifted the chattering monkey on her shoulder. He, as well as the mice, had successfully survived the five g's takeoff acceleration, weightless floating at 350 miles, and the final parachuting crash to Earth again.

"Bebop, you rascal," the girl chuckled. "Little do you know you just went higher above Earth than any living creature in history. Take a bow!"

The monk instead took a banana from the bowl nearby, munching with simian unconcern.

John Mack stared at the girl, gloomily. "Inch by inch almost, we fight our way up. Gets harder all the time. And more dangerous. But you didn't answer my question, Alice. I'm tall, dark and handsome, or a reasonable facsimile thereof. I'm not too old. I'm gay by nature with a passably sweet disposition, even when some fumblefoot sergeant fouls things up. I wouldn't beat you more

often than necessary." He had the proper light smile fixed on his face now, and went on smoothly. "You mean if Bebop survived this trip without cosmic burn, a man has the same chance."

"Two plus two," nodded Alice. "We'll get a ship to the moon. Inch by inch. Step by step. We'll say Boo to the Big Dark yet. But what do you see in me, John? A prim female scientist wearing horn-rimmed goggles? Freckles, wide mouth, size eight shoe, I'm tall enough to walk with a slight stoop. You can't add that up to beauty, not even prettiness. And you *are* handsome, Major dear. The misfits. Yes, we'll get across the Big Dark, don't you worry."

Mack lit a cigarette, jerkily. "Alice, please! I'm dead serious —"

"So am I, John. I think we'll reach the moon."

Mack stamped on his cigarette. "Alice! You know what I mean. Don't be a sadist. Trouble is, you're a trained psychologist, among your other scientific specialties. You've analyzed me. What's *wrong* with me, Alice? What do you find *lacking* in me—"

"Ah, ah," she smiled back, admonishingly. "Let's keep it light, John. A game. Fun."

"Great fun," agreed Mack bitterly. "Uproarious. For a year now. No, no, a thousand times no. For a year, twelve months, fifty-two weeks, 365 days plus or minus since we met here. And you keep saying no. *Why?*" He glared. "I've got the right to know, Alice—*why?*"

She fed a mouse, not facing him. "Sunspots, John. That'll do as well as anything. Sunspots make me obstinate. Squeaky here isn't doing well. He's not long for this world. Still, I think we'll cross space someday. Tell me, John"—she was suddenly curious—"if a ship were ready now to try for the Moon, would you go if appointed?"

"On order, yes," Mack said, forcing his mind to the question, answering honestly. "Volunteer, no. I'm not the hero type."

"I admire your frankness," said Alice.

John Mack was lighting another cigarette, but held the flame an inch away, forgetting. So that was it. She admired his frankness, but not his lack of courage. *So that was it.* He might have guessed. Female Einstein or not, it came down to plain fundamentals. The female wanting her mate to be strong and brave. Unflinching at danger. What did she see him as? An effete dandy, lion of the

dress dummies at the Officer's Club? An impeccable, groomed, washed, slick-haired, highly civilized *coward?*

The acid thoughts turned Mack's voice into a drip of acid. "And you, darling? Anything for dear old Science? You of course *would* ride the first rocket to the Moon. You'd accept."

"Wouldn't get the chance," she returned, glancing at him a bit sharply. "Because first of all I'm a woman. That would be no go on a trial flight, requiring male stamina. And second, because of course—"

. . .

The phone rang and the major picked it up. The voice was excited. "Guard post Red Rock reporting, sir. Something's coming down on radar, sir."

"Well what, man?" snapped Mack.

A pause, then— "A . . . a sort of flying saucer, sir."

"Nonsense." That was the word that first spilled from Mack's lips, automatically, followed by a stern lecture on ignoring mirages, avoiding heat stroke, and keeping strictly away from alcohol. To which a period was put by a heavy THUMP through the phone.

"It . . . it just landed, sir. A flying saucer, real as life. We all see it. Six of us. Wh-what shall we do, sir?"

"Nothing," said Major Mack. "Wait till I get there."

He slammed down the phone and slammed the door behind him, making the seat of his jeep in one leap. The door opened and Alice Wright peered out, puzzled.

"Oh, forgot to tell you," said Mack. "They reported—but it's ridiculous. Hop in, Alice. We'll settle this right now."

He told her as he drove madly past the labs and barracks and out the gates, along a straight road into desert land.

"Well, say something, Alice."

"What can you say, John, until you get there and see it yourself? Or find six men suffering from mass delusion, or kicking a case of empty beer bottles around."

Within the hour they skidded past Red Rock, looming hugely. Beyond lay the guard post, marking off-limits of the proving grounds. Beyond lay the flying saucer.

It wasn't a flying saucer, except by idiom. Anything mysterious from the sky these days was a flying saucer. It was a round globe, perfectly spherical, solid metal with no windows and only one door hatch, still closed.

Mack and Alice jumped out even

before the jeep came to a halt. Mack had forgotten to take it out of gear so it kept going, winding erratically out over the hot sands, to be lost forever. Nobody noticed.

The six post guardsmen stood a wary hundred yards off, with machineguns and a small mortar already in place, plus rifles at the ready with bayonets affixed. They sighed in visible relief as the major took over all responsibility.

Mack asked for full details. They had first spotted it by radar, at 100,000 feet, coming down fast. Almost at meteric speed. They expected it to crash like a meteor. But it had, amazingly, slowed down, with pulsing flashes of greenish light thrusting rhythmically ahead of it.

"Some form of photon or radiation jets," interpolated Alice Wright, wiping her glasses in pretended calm. "Way beyond our liquid fuels. Probably a refinement of atomic fission, using direct energy. Maybe. I'm only making silly guesses."

The soldiers reported it had still landed with a fearful crash. The globe was cracked at the bottom, they could see. Obviously a bad landing. The crew within—whatever the "crew" was—must have been badly shaken, most probably injured or killed.

"Russia?" said Mack, guardedly.

"Possible," said Alice. "But more likely non-terrestrial. It just . . . well, *looks* that way to me."

They glanced at each other. Wordless. The first visitor of space? Would this mark off the year 1954 apart from all other years?

"Let's find out," said Alice, "by opening it. Or would you rather call reinforcements first, Major Mack? It's in the best tradition to play safe and expect an enemy."

There might have been faint irony in her voice. It was so plain now to Mack, her contempt for missing manhood. Bristling, Mack turned. "Sergeant, alert the general at headquarters. Just tell him briefly what landed, and that I'm going to open the damned thing. Tell him it's an emergency, in that the crew may be seriously injured, so it can't wait for him or anybody."

Mack glanced at the girl, wondering if he had carried it off properly, in her eyes. He couldn't tell. Her eyes flickered as if in approval, but it might be the sun glinting across her squinted eyes. Maybe it was hopeless trying to impress her, if she had already pigeon-holed him, psychiatrically,

under S for spineless.

Posting his men in a wide circle, the major approached the globe with a firm step, shoulders back. Was she watching his shoulders? Then he noticed he had two shadows, one with curves.

He stopped. "Now look, Alice. You're a—"

"Scientist," she said.

"It's my job, anyway," Mack protested, scrabbling for the right words, for her. "No need to risk two lives."

"Very noble and brave, I'm sure," she said, and Mack felt miserable, his pose so easily X-rayed through and through by her sharp mind. Damn the woman and her goddam insufferable IQ.

"Noble schmoble," he tried once more, really concerned over her safety. "It's just plain common sense. Please go back, Alice."

"I've got a curiosity bump this big. Coming, Major?"

He had to hurry to catch up with her. Did she have to keep putting him behind the eight-ball, over and over? Together they came close.

Heat radiated from the sphere, from its meteor-hot plunge through the atmosphere. But it was not much more han desert heat now. There was an obvious turnscrew handle for the door, which Mack seized and spun. The door opened easily, as some hidden leverage aided Mack's pull. A gust of air rushed inward.

"Lower pressure air inside," said Alice. "Could be from Mars, for instance."

Mars.

Mack heard the word in faint shock. He hadn't quite gotten to putting it in concrete thought before, that this might very possibly be a ship from another world.

Mars. And Martians. You had to let your brain skirt around the thought a moment before letting it jump in with both feet.

There was only silence inside. "Dead? Shall we go in and see?" Alice politely made it a question, but was already stooping as if to enter, catching Mack flat-footed. Almost roughly, biting his lips, Mack jerked her arm and shot in ahead of her. Did she think he was afraid of meeting the Martians? He was, of course, but did she have to act as if he *alone*, out of millions of other men, was normally human in that fear? What was her ideal—a robot?

It was lightless inside, as though the original lighting system had gone out. Only what sunlight filtered in the open hatch stabbed through the gloom. They saw self-luminous dials first, then

bulky shadows, and then the debris.

It lay all over, a shattered mass of junk. Whatever fittings the interior had been supplied with had wrenched loose and banged together like a head-on train wreck, in the crash to Earth. Among the debris was organic debris. They were suddenly sick at the smell of blood, or a close approach to it.

Indeterminate blobs of pulpy flesh lay all over. The grinding millstones of smashing material had of course killed them all. Not only killed them but hacked and butchered them to bits.

"Flashlight," yelled Mack out the door, only thinking of it now. He fretted in vast impatience until it was handed to him by the running sergeant. Returning, Mack swung the beam around where the girl stood. They could stomach it now, the bloody mess.

"Too bad," said Mack in genuine sorrow. "Martyrs to this flight, I guess. Any idea what kind of . . . of creatures they were, Alice?"

She was already kneeling, prodding flesh. "Seem to have been heavily furred, for one thing. Only natural, on cold Mars. A leg. An arm. Four fingers to the hand. Well, nothing tentacular or monstrous, I'd say. Seemingly mammalian. A head here — John, the light . . . look, will you?"

"A *human* head?" Mack said, really shocked.

"Not quite that," Alice denied. "I'll have to have a closer look." She reached a hand for it, drew back, swallowing.

Mack heard the knock of opportunity, and grabbed up the grisly decapitated object. For a ghastly moment he thought he was through, but he managed to steel himself against retching, right in front of her eyes.

Triumphantly, grinning, he swung it before her eyes. "Okay, take a good look, Alice."

She retched, miserably. Mack felt as if he had conquered Mount Everest, reaching the top after bitter months of struggle.

She turned back in a moment, composed. "Little boy holds nasty old snake before little girl," she said, in a gently reproving tone, and Mack tumbled down from the top of Mount Everest to the bottom of a black pit, out of which he knew he could never climb again. Hopeless. He was licked.

Now he saw his true image, in her goddamned analytical mind. A little boy trying to play man. Arrested development. Immaturity. And she was *not* the type to want to mother the man she mar-

ried.

Mack stayed in the black pit, not trying anymore. Somehow, it was possible to fall *out* of love, wasn't it? Well, back to the goddamned Martians.

Alice took the head from him now. It was about the size of a human head, but with furry ears and shaggy brows that hung down over the staring eyes, which were pale yellow. The nose was pronouncedly De Bergerac with four nostrils. Better intake of thin Martian air, Alice surmised. The mouth was small and lipless, with a receding chin. The whole effect was semi-human and yet non-human.

"I can't put my finger in it," Alice said, "but it's more like something else . . . hmm."

They both jumped, nerves tight, as the deathly silence was broken.

"A moan," said Mack, sweeping his flash around frantically. "One of them must be alive."

"Over there, John . . . under that heap of leathery stuff. Quick, the light."

Mack thrust the flashlight in her hands and yanked junk away, unburying the moaning figure, quite whole and alive.

"How could one be alive? But then, freak accidents happen. Cars overturn, smash, people step out without a scratch. What luck, John! What great good luck. A live one. A live Martian, or some citizen of some world. Carry it out."

Since it had humanoid form, they carried it out as they would a man, Mack at the armpits, Alice at the legs.

"Heavy," grunted Mack. "Can you manage? I'll call one of the men."

"John, dear. You've seen me lift plenty heavy things at the lab. Let's not be gallant, shall we?"

Sure, she could do anything a man could do. Maybe that's why she didn't need a man, or want a man, unless he was a *man*. Peek-a-boo, I see inside you too, sister. And the more I see inside you . . . yes, the more I love you, damnit. But I've got to forget it. Laugh it off. Haven't laughed in a year . . .

"Careful," Alice was saying. "Might have broken bones. Internal injuries. Just get him outside the ship, in the shade of the globe. Any of your men handy with a first-aid kit?"

But they found it unnecessary, outside. The visitor lay a moment in the hot sand, blinking and whimpering in pain, then suddenly sat up, staring around. In another moment he was struggling to his feet

and stood swaying, but apparently not more than bruised and shaken.

In the sunlight, they saw the space voyager in full detail. Taller than a man by two feet and proportionately bulky. Covered with silken-fine fur from top to toe, his head matted with a thick tangle of pale brown. An enormous chest expansion and thick arms and legs.

"Narrows down to a Martian more and more," said Alice. "Big chest for thin air. Huge bulky body easily carried around in the light gravity. And plenty of fat protection against Martian cold."

"But that face," said Mack, disturbed. "Idiotic—"

Alice frowned. It was true. The quasi-intelligent face had fallen slack, vapid. Smiles flitted briefy over the sensitive twitching mouth. But the smiles of a moron. Of a vacant mind.

"Insane," said Alice, in deep pity. "Completely psychotic. And no wonder. The first trial flight through space, with all its nerve-wracking unknowns and tense fears. The jitters as they realized they couldn't brake enough, were going to crash on Earth. The final awful landing, with the ship bursting to bits before his eyes—as it must have seemed to him. And probably his thoughts were shrieking, "No! To die here, never meet the Earthmen, never return!' Enough to unhinge any mind."

"Poor chap," murmured Mack. All his dreams blasted. Columbus of space and that sort of thing. I can see it too, his mind smashing when the ship did."

The Martian — for so they thought of him now—stared only vaguely back at them, his eyes shifting and darting all over. But without real awareness. He had no idea it was a new world. Nor did he remember the trip through space, or anything. He grinned at them almost like a child, in a dream world of his own.

Suddenly he sat down heavily and played with the sand.

"Gravity too strong for him," Alice nodded. "At least his self-protective instincts are working."

But little else, that was plain. The Martian played with the sand like a kid and started to babble a meaningless garble. At times he interjected squeals that might be empty laughter, at nothing.

"It's enough to drive *me* crazy," growled Mack. "The first Martian to visit Earth in history, and he's out of his mind. His home planet, his civilization, what propelled his ship—and how we'd like to know that—but we'll never

know any of it from him . . . "

"Not so fast, John." Alice rubbed her hands, briskly. "Ever hear of insanity being cured? It's done every day, you know. Electroshock, drug therapy, psychiatric hypnotism, a whole bag of tricks to be tried. If he has anything approaching a human mind, I think something can be done. And I'm going to start working on him right away. With your permission, major?"

Mack snapped a cigarette far over the sand. "You're a qualified psychologist of Space Medicine, as well as biologist. You don't need orders from me. Go to it and good luck, Alice. Hope you can yank that poor critter out of his black pit."

While I stay in mine.

A week later, at the base hospital, Dr. Alice Wright greeted Major John Mack's umpteenth visit with the umpteenth shake of her head.

"No luck, John. The language barrier is insurmountable, I guess. A psychiatrist's main tool, really, is ideas. New and saving thoughts he gets through to the sick mind. But ideas can only be given with words. And unfortunately, I don't know Martian."

"This can be a big thing for both of us," said Mack for the umpteenth time. "If you can lick it and cure him, we'll both get kicked upstairs like a rocket."

"Dreaming of eagles, John? Or even a star?"

"Don't worry," said Mack evenly. "I know they wouldn't impress you a bit. That was the last time I asked you—before the Martian came. Strictly business between us now, Dr. Wright. Fix up that mad Martian and we both feather our nests."

"Mad Martian," laughed Alice, in her sudden way. "I like that, John. Sounds like a melodrama. You *do* say the funniest things at times—"

"I wasn't trying to be funny," said Mack stiffly.

"No . . . no, I guess you weren't." Alice's throaty chuckle died into a sigh. "This is all too serious to be funny, isn't it?"

She gave him a queer look that Mack couldn't fathom at all. He didn't try. He didn't care anymore. He turned on his heel and strode out. Yes, it was serious to him, this Martian thing. Washington was in an uproar about it, of course. The whole country was. The whole world.

The first Martian. The first *anything*, from space, from another world. He had dropped out of

the clear blue sky, into Mack's lap. A bonanza of fame. Major Mack first greeted the Martian . . . his name would always be linked with it. We give you *Colonel* Mack, ladies and gentlemen, who first welcomed the Martian.

And as long as he didn't think of Alice, who hadn't dropped into his lap, he walked on air. Sometimes he didn't think of Alice for ten minutes at a stretch. The Martian crowded her out. The mad Martian. Funny? Sure it was funny. Ha ha. But he'd laugh for real, someday, with eagles on his shoulders and Alice off of them. Someday . . .

The next time Mack came in, he tried to put it gently.

"Bad news, Alice—for you. I tried to hold them off, give you more time. Washington is whipping up a top-notch team of psychologists and psychiatrists to work over the Martian."

Alice laughed, shockingly. It was almost a hysterical laugh. "Tell Washington to forget it. It won't do a bit of good.

Mack blew out a gust of smoke. "Now look, Alice. I know you're good, and you did your best. But after all, there are other trained mental experts. Come, Doctor. Isn't it childish of you to be peeved? Jealous?"

She laughed again. Mack sat down, bewildered. It was like someone laughing in all the wrong places at a movie.

She controlled herself with an effort. "Let them come. Let them find out for themselves if they wish. I'm just trying to save the tax-payers' money."

"Find out what? What are you driving at?"

"That they'll never cure this space visitor of his so-called insanity."

"So-called? You mean the Martian *isn't* insane?"

"I mean he isn't a Martian," said Alice sweetly.

Mack turned red. "All right, so he's a Venusian or Jovian or from another star. Of all the childish things, Alice. Why didn't you say right out he's not from Mars?"

"But he *is* from Mars, John dear."

"If you wore a military uniform," said Mack, "I'd have you shot at sunrise. He's not a Martian but he's from Mars. Alice—*your* mind—?"

Alice smiled. "I'm only a maniac when my nylons run. Follow me, John, if you please."

She led the silent, wondering officer into the hall and finally into one ill-smelling room. She waved

around.

"I'm not blind," Mack said fumingly. "The mice and rats and monkeys we use in test rocket flights. What's that got to do with—".

Mack stopped. He filled ten long seconds with dead silence detonating thoughts. Then—"Alice! No—you can't mean—?"

She made a tsk-tsk, directed at herself. "Would *we* send precious humans to the Moon or Mars, on the *first* flight! Very likely the first crew landing on the Moon wil be captained by one of *his* relatives."

She was feeding Bebop a banana.

"Then the 'Martian'—the whole 'crew'—" Mack choked, unable to go on. Laughs were choking him, up from his toes.

Alice laughed too. "Now you know what to tell Washington before they make fools of themselves, like I did for a week. Brilliant, am I? The Martian wore no clothes. I didn't even stop to think of myself stepping out on Mars—in the nude."

Alice was feeding a banana now to the huge furred form jabbering in the cage next to Bebop. "All right, I deserve it, John. Laugh at me all you want."

"No—no," gasped Mack. "Me, and my silver eagles! I polished the damned things a hundred times in the past week. And even in a daydream that's work. Colonel John Mack, who greeted the first Martian . . . *monkey*. What could be funnier. Wait'll I tell this at the Officer's Club."

Alice took off her glasses and stared, as if seeing a real Martian. "But the joke's on *you*, John. I could always laugh at myself. But you . . . John, you *have* got a sense of humor. You have after all . . . *darling!*"

Mack nearly fainted at the kiss.

He finally got his voice working. "Alice, don't tell me. *That's* what you were looking for all the time? That's what you poked around inside me to find? Not · not—?"

"Bravery?" supplied Alice quickly. "You poor male idiot. How many dragons would I need to be rescued from? In psychology, it's the man who can laugh at himself that can lick anything, including his worst enemy—himself. One good laugh by plain John, on serious old Major Mack, and you could have bought the ring months ago, you poor wonderful nincompoop."

"I'll be a monkey's—" Mack grinned and started over. "I'll be a Martian monkey's uncle."

To Rachel is was no sacrifice; with no regrets she traded a possible forty years of life on Venus for two years of heaven on Earth.

THE LAST TWO SHIPS

By Fred Samuels

THE last rocket had left two years ago. Now the bombardment began. Great lunar rocks smashed into Earth. Upon its moon, now some twenty thousand miles away, mountains were being rent asunder.

They stood arm in arm and watched. Centuries ago their ancestors had stood and watched the beginning of this process which must someday culminate in Earth's destruction. Then huge rocks were drawn from the oncoming moon and left to swirl around Earth, on and on.

Now all of Luna was returning home, home into the bosom from whence it had been flung out into space.

They watched and remembered the day the last rocket left Earth.

He had come home excited. Rachel made him sit down and relax. His heart condition made even the slightest excitement perilous.

"Rachel, the last space ship is leaving tomorrow."

She said nothing as she removed the pot from the range. She poured the thick, green soup into a bowl and sat down opposite her husband.

"Did you hear me? The last ship is leaving tomorrow . . . at eight A.M."

"Will every one fit into it?"

"Of course! There are no more than two hundred people left on Earth."

"I wonder how they're doing on Venus."

"Okay, I suppose."

"Can they breathe there?"

"They took enough oxygen for months. By that time they'll have converted enough carbon dioxide into oxygen to last indefinitely."

"Oh . . . How do you feel, Henry?"

"Fine, fine, of course. Come on, let's start packing."

That night had been full of dreams and memories. She remembered how they watched the first contingent of space ships roar off. It would still be safe on Earth for a while longer. But Earth would be evacuated gradually so as to avoid panic. Day by day the ships took off. They moved toward Venus. They carried with them the tools and knowledge necessary to build a new civilization on a planet where nothing but great, luxuriant plants now dwelt.

Day by day she had thought of excuses to stay behind a little longer, a little longer.

And now the last ship was to leave. There could be no more excuses, no more delays.

She saw the great rocket shoot from the ground. Beside her, strapped down was Henry. The ship hurtled upwards. Henry turned pale. He clutched at his heart.

He can never stand acceleration? He can never stand acceleration. Are you sure, Doctor Ross? Yes, I'm sure, my friend. Are you sure? Yes, I'm sure. Does he know? Yes, he knows. Will he die? On a rocket he will die. On a rocket he will die.

"On a rocket he will die!" She sat up and looked at the sleeping form of her husband. He had not heard her. Then she looked at the luminous hands of the radio clock near the bed. Three-fifteen. The radio was set to go on at six-thirty. They were all packed. They just had to walk fifteen minutes to the launching platform and that would be that.

She pulled out the little white knob on top and adjusted the alarm. The radio would go on at eight-fifteen. Henry was tired. He needed a good rest.

She went back under the covers. She would not want to live without him. A year, perhaps two more years on a deserted planet. It would be that much more happiness, that much more time together. Venus would probably be too warm anyhow.

When he awoke, he looked at the clock and knew what had happened. He was disappointed. Perhaps two more years of dragging himself around, gasping for air, throwing pills down his throat, twisting and bending over. Two more years of pain and anguish and waiting for the end. He had looked upon the acceleration as a respectable way of committing suicide. It would cause no scandal, no ill feelings. Just an unavoidable accident, a made-to-order means of suicide. The torment would be over. Now the ship had

left. He reached for a small bottle on the radio table and poured two pills hastily into his hand. He dropped them down his throat. Two more years of torture. Then he looked at Rachel's face. She was still asleep. She was dreaming. He could tell that from the smile.

Then suddenly a great shame overwhelmed him. Here he was feeling sorry for himself when she had just given up so much for him. She had given up perhaps forty years of life. She had given up the chance to have children. She was beautiful. She would not have stayed a widow for long. He looked at the smiling face. Could anyone love another so much? He loved her more than he had once thought could be possible, but would he have given up so much? Would he have remained behind with her had the situation been reversed? He bent over the sleeping form and kissed her.

They were walking arm in arm through the woods. The birds sang all about. They rested upon the grass. Stretched out they saw the sun rise through the trees. She rolled over and pressed her lips onto the dewy grass.

She awoke and saw him moving up from her.

"How do you feel, Henry?" She was not quite sure if she could look him in the eye.

"I feel wonderful; I rather think I'm going to outlive this old Earth."

She looked carefully at him. He was smiling. If he were angry or in pain she did not know. That he had vowed to keep his suffering to himself she could not have known. All she saw was a smiling man looking down at her with moist eyes.

"Shall we take a ride to Coney Island today, dear?"

"That would be fine, Henry." She got up and started looking for the bathing suits and then stopped and had a good laugh at herself. There was nobody left but them. This was the day of the last rocket.

For two years they had been happy. They walked beside the ocean, they rode out into the country and stopped alongside streams and watched the frogs and turtles and listened to the birds. She wondered if these animals knew of the impending tragedy, if they cared. She wondered if they would continue raising young if they knew. She hadn't noticed many nests lately. She wondered what the whole vast history of Earth meant now. From Adam and Eve

to Henry and Rachel. She laughed as she thought of what Henry would say to that. Henry, who had gotten his M.A. in physical anthropology, Henry who had made great contributions to the study of evolution until Doctor Ross had forbidden him to go on any more expeditions.

"You can teach in the classroom if you don't allow things to upset you."

"But my whole life is tied up in field research. I'm still young. I can stand any physical strain."

"Your heart cannot. You never will get old if you don't stop now."

That was years before the final decision for Earth evacuation. And then the great exodus. And the full story of evolution would never be known. Buried somewhere in the blackened wreckage of Earth would lie the tale never to be discovered. It was almost as if someone or something did not want it to be known.

Yet Henry had never been so happy. Her love which allowed her to surrender years of living penetrated into his being and awakened feelings of love within him he had long since lost in the objectiveness of unearthing bones and analyzing them.

They would stand beneath the moon, now massive in size and look at the stars that would still be there when the maan would be but a shattered memory. Henry would place his arm about her and whisper into her ear as he did many years ago.

"I would give you the moon, if I could," he found that sense of humor was indispensable.

"We'll soon have the moon, just you and I," she found it easy to joke about the oncoming disaster. She had been given two years of grace with the man she loved. What else could one desire.

In all that time he had seemed serenely happy and untroubled by his condition. Whenever she asked he would say he was feeling wonderful. He would not even take pills in front of her anymore. And when he was so wracked with pain that he felt he had to double up he somehow managed to keep it inside till he could be alone for a few moments. Once she came back from the kitchen to find him flailing his arms about wildly into the sofa. When he heard her footsteps he looked up, face pale and drawn.

"I guess I just dozed off and had a nightmare," he gasped.

"Are you sure you are all right, Henry?"

He somehow managed to draw

color back into his face.

"Ain't a fellow allowed a nightmare now and then?"

She seemed convinced by his act and let it pass. The Earth had been trembling lately. The time could not be far off when the mountains of Luna would come hurtling down upon its mother planet.

And then it came. Great flaming rocks plummeted towards Earth as mountains on the moon cracked apart. They stood outside and watched as meteorites smashed into forest and ocean. Flames rose where forests had once stood green and tranquil, where animals had once roamed and birds sang, and fish swam in the streams, now boiling torrents of death.

The ocean seethed and hissed as myriad charred hulks rose to the surface. They stood arm in arm as a burning rock buried itself into the ground, half a mile away. They felt the heat as the surrounding countryside took on added temperature.

"It can't be much longer," he said. "You're not sorry, are you?"

She looked at him and said nothing but held him close.

"Are you sorry, Henry?"

"I have never been so happy."

She raised her eyes to his and he looked deep into them and saw how needless his question was. He saw how needless anything really was except to be loved, to love, to mean life to someone else, to have someone else mean life to him. He didn't care at all now if the secrets of evolution lay locked in a burned out sphere till time eternal. Nothing mattered. Nothing save each last moment with her.

They held each other closely, firmly, as a rock two miles in diameter crashed upon them.

A golden mist in the form of a space ship glided down.

"Look, my darling, the ship that left two years ago wasn't the last one after all."

"No, Henry, and look how gently it lands."

The pilot and co-pilot drifted through the golden haze and gathered the two into their arms. They placed them upon a soft, violet rug within the ship and left the blackened sphere behind.

As the ship moved effortlessly on and on a voice soft and musical came from the pilot as he turned to his comrade.

"These last two have come a long way from the first two. I think He will be pleased."

The End

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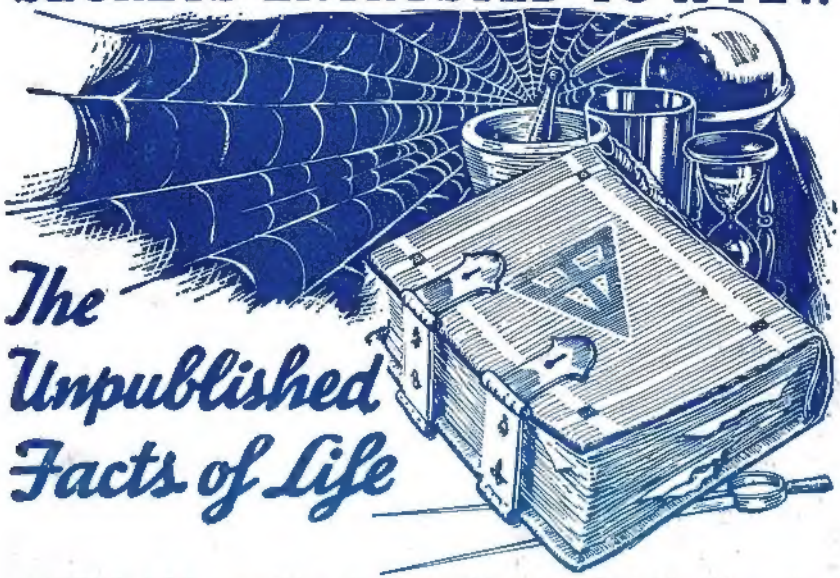

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